

THE
INVESTIGATORS
in

**THE SECRET OF THE
DEAD RINGERS**



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Bob is a witness to a bank robbery and he is the only person to see the face of the bank robber for a split-second. With a police sketch in hand, The Three Investigators wonder how to approach this case, when the bank robber, or so it seems, pays them a visit at Headquarters. The three then understands that their new client is the identical twin brother of the bank robber. As the case goes on, Jupiter, Pete and Bob can no longer tell which of the brothers they are dealing with. Very soon, this confusion leads to a dangerous situation.

The Three Investigators
in
The Secret of the Dead Ringers

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1. A Bank Robbery

Bob Andrews looked at his watch. It was a quarter past five. Damn it! The game would start in half an hour. If he wanted to get to the salvage yard on time, he'd had to rush. He hung the heavy grocery bags for his mother on the handlebars of his bike, swung himself onto the saddle and pedalled.

At full speed, he raced through downtown Rocky Beach, the picturesque coastal town near Hollywood. It was a beautiful summer day, warm and windy. The salty breeze from the nearby Pacific Ocean ruffled his hair as he rode through the hilly streets. The shopping bags swayed back and forth as he turned into the last bend and braked in front of the bank building. Very quickly now, he had to withdraw some money for his mother, unload the shopping at home and then go and meet Jupiter!

The bicycle wobbled alarmingly when Bob folded down the stand. The heavy bags tugged at the handlebars. Should he take it off? For thirty seconds at the bank branch? No. he didn't think the wheel would tip over—hopefully. He then hurried to the door.

Something was strange when Bob entered the bank. All heads turned to him. But the employees weren't smiling. They just stared at him, not moving.

"Are my pants unzipped?" Bob thought to himself. But neither scorn nor disgust spoke from the faces—but pure horror. There were three customers and two bank employees at the counters. They were all deathly pale, except for Michael Jackson. The famous pop idol was here—in a bank branch in Rocky Beach. Actually it was a man donning a Michael Jackson mask.

Jackson stood at the cash register and turned to Bob and gave him a stupid-ass grin. Then he raised his gun. "Go! Get over there!" his voice muffled through the plastic mask. Before Bob knew what was happening to him, the man took four or five quick steps and was already with him, pushing him away from the door into a corner. "You stay right there, you hear me, boy?"

Bob nodded. It was a bank robbery that he barged right in.

"Come on, everything in the bag," the bank robber said to the cashier. "Come on!"

Bob watched silently as the cashier with shaking hands filled a plastic bag with thick bundles of money. Meanwhile, the masked man kept turning around, aiming at Bob and the two women customers in turn. No one said a word. Finally, all the money was in the bag. The robber grabbed it and walked backwards to the exit waving his gun around.

Bob feverishly thought about how he could stop the man. The police had probably already been informed by a hidden alarm and on their way here. But they would be too late. There was probably a getaway car outside. In a few seconds, the robber would be long gone. Just as Bob was thinking about blocking the man's path, the man turned to face him and stared at him from the little black holes in his motionless grinning plastic face. Bob momentarily lost his courage and he stayed where he was.

The man groped for the door, opened it and stepped out into the street. Bob could watch him through the glass door. The bank robber let his gun disappear in his belt, turned around—and bumped into Bob's bicycle. The handlebars got caught in the money bag and tore it out

of his hand. Startled, the masked man took a step to the side, stepped on the rear wheel, stumbled and fell.

At that moment the plastic mask slipped down and Bob saw his face.

“Now! Now! Now you got it! Hold it... Hold it! Ahhh, no, now it’s gone again! Jupe, you’re driving me crazy!” Pete Crenshaw kicked a soda can furiously. It flew over the salvage yard in a high arc and landed behind a mountain of old furniture. Then he turned back to the snow flurry on the screen. So this was the result of Jupiter’s brilliant plan to watch the Dragons’ football game against the Flames on a big screen.

Jupiter had hung a screen up in his open-air workshop at the salvage yard especially for this purpose. His latest repair work was a video projector with which a normal television picture could be projected onto the screen, enlarged many times over. Jupiter had ripped off an old, broken device from his uncle, who ran The Jones Salvage Yard, and repaired it in painstaking detail work. At least that’s what he had believed... until the projector took its last breath at its première with a flash and a loud buzz. And now Jupiter fiddled around with the antenna of an ancient television, desperately searching for the right channel and a decent picture. Pete kept looking at the clock. Great. The first quarter was almost over.

“Where is Bob?” mumbled Jupiter.

“Maybe he was smart enough to watch the game at home,” Pete said.

“He promised to come.”

“Don’t change the subject, Jupe! Just get the picture, and fast,” Pete urged.

“You will not achieve an optimization of the reception quality through inflammatory commands.”

Pete rolled his eyes. Whenever things got complicated, Jupiter adapted his language to the situation and talked in such a stilted way that Pete usually only understood half of it.

“Optimization of the reception quality? For this, there would have to be a reception first!” Pete exclaimed. “Stop! Stop! There it is again! Ah, no, gone again!”

“I think the basic problem is not so much the reception of the television waves as the technical condition of the device itself,” Jupiter surmised aloud. “It seems to me that the television has not yet reached its optimum operating temperature.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“It needs to warm up before it gives a decent picture,” Jupe said.

“You’re not serious.”

“Afraid so.”

“And how long will that take?”

“Well, it could well be several minutes.”

Due to the lack of other cola cans, this time Pete kicked against the old printing press, which was gathering dust in a corner. “If only I had stayed home like Bob and watched the game there! Do you at least have a radio somewhere? One that works, I mean. Maybe they’ll broadcast the game.”

“The radio is currently under repair,” Jupiter replied sheepishly.

“Is there anything here that works?”

“This possibility decreases the more you kick and punch our technical equipment.”

“I’ll mistreat it as long as I feel like it,” Pete said and slapped the television set with his flat hand. The snow flurry flickered briefly—and gave way to a razor-sharp image of a walking candy bar. “Ha! Ha! We have a picture! We got a picture now! Adjust the station, Jupe! Come on!”

“Don’t panic. The first quarter’s over anyway, and it’s the commercial break.” Pete pushed himself past Jupiter and zapped through the channels.

“... love you, Brenda. I need you to...” A soap opera.

“... the first Russian cosmonaut...” A quiz show.

“... a bank in Rocky Beach was robbed...” A news bulletin.

“Hey!” cried Jupiter. “Switch back! There was something about Rocky Beach!”

“Sharon Lockwood on the Rocky Beach bank robbery...” The picture showed a reporter in front of a small building. There was a police car in the background, several officers were walking around busily.

“Exactly forty minutes ago, this branch of the Elf Bank in downtown Rocky Beach on the California coast was robbed. The perpetrator, a male, wore a plastic mask with the face of pop star Michael Jackson. He stormed the bank when there was no customer in the building, threatened the employees with a gun and got away with almost two hundred thousand dollars. But then something incredible happened. This young man was at the scene and got a look at the perpetrator’s face.” The camera backed up a little and now caught the person standing next to Sharon Lockwood. Pete and Jupiter could not believe their eyes.

“But that’s...” Pete began.

“Bob!” Jupiter finished the sentence for him.

Bob looked uncertainly into the camera, tried to smile, then decided to look at Sharon.

“Bob Andrews, you sort of walked right into the middle of that bank robbery. What exactly happened?”

“Well, not much, really. I went in and the man was already standing at the cash register and asked for the money. When he noticed me, he pointed a gun at me.”

“How did you come to see his face?”

“The robber stumbled over my bike outside the door. The mask slipped off his face.”

“And what did he look like?”

“Well... ordinary, actually,” Bob stammered. “He was perhaps in his mid-thirties with thick black curls and a black beard... But I only saw him for a brief moment, he immediately put his mask back on, got up and ran away quickly.”

“Is it true you’re a detective, Bob?”

Bob trimmed. “Uh... yes, that’s right.”

“Yes, dear viewers, this is actually one of The Three Investigators who are already something of a local celebrity in Rocky Beach. And, Bob, would you investigate this case?”

“Well, I honestly haven’t thought about that yet.”

Sharon Lockwood smiled. It was that overbearing adult smile that Jupiter and Pete hated so much.

“She doesn’t take him seriously,” whispered Pete.

“The police will use your description to make a sketch for the manhunt. I’m going to ask Inspector Cutter of the Rocky Beach Police Department. Good afternoon, Inspector.”

“My name is Cotta.”

“Excuse me.”

“I can’t believe it!” Pete cried and moved a little closer to the screen. “Cotta is there too!”

“Inspector, have you had any progress in the manhunt?” Sharon asked.

“We found the bank robber’s getaway car. It is a stolen vehicle, by the perpetrator himself, but it’s only a matter of time before we catch him.”

“Thanks to the excellent description of the perpetrator by our young witness, I assume.”

“Indeed,” Cotta growled and gave Bob a scowl.

“What do you say to the witness being a young colleague of yours, Mr Cutter?”

“Cotta. Nothing at all.”

“You don’t seem too happy about Bob’s observation.”

Bob beat the inspector to it. “I suppose Inspector Cotta believes I didn’t get into this by chance... because we’ve dealt with each other before.”

“Really? I hope not in a negative sense,” Sharon remarked.

“No comments,” Cotta said.

“There are many cases where we needed Inspector Cotta’s help,” Bob added.

“That’s great!” Sharon shouted radiantly into the camera.

“These are stories that life wrote. Will the young detective and the police inspector now work together?”

This time Inspector Cotta was quicker. “Under no circumstances!”

“Police and a detective in pursuit of the Rocky Beach bank robber. Return to studio.”

“Thank you, Sharon. And now for the economy. In the stock market...”

Jupiter switched off the TV. “Wow!”

“No way! We sit here and fiddle around with the stupid box and just a short distance away, a bank was robbed. And Bob was in the middle of it.”

“Let’s go!” cried Jupiter. “We have to go to Bob!”

“What about the football game?”

“Forget the silly game! Haven’t you noticed it yet? We just stumbled onto a new case!”

2. The Intruder

The camera team was just packing up when Jupiter and Pete reached the bank. Some onlookers had gathered, but now that the television had also left, the crowd slowly dispersed. The two detectives spotted Bob near the police car where he was talking to Cotta and walked towards him.

When the inspector noticed the two of them, his face darkened. “Jupiter Jones and Pete Crenshaw, who would have thought of it?”

“Good afternoon, Inspector,” Jupiter said.

“Jupe! Pete! How did you get here? You can’t imagine what I’ve been through!”

“Enough of this silly show!” Cotta said to the three. “I knew from the beginning that you didn’t get into this bank robbery by accident, Bob. That your two... investigator colleagues suddenly appearing here all of a sudden does not exactly convince me of the opposite. So, tell me, what do you know about this?”

“Absolutely nothing,” Bob said. “It was pure coincidence, really.”

“Your assumption that we knew about the robbery is my interpretation of your highest appreciation of our criminological intuition, which of course honours us, but Bob is right. It was a coincidence. We just heard about it on TV and we came straight here,” Jupiter said.

Cotta frowned. “And you expect me to believe that? If there’s one thing I learned during my time with the Rocky Beach police, it’s that The Three Investigators never just happen to show up at a crime scene by accident.”

“It is the truth,” Jupiter affirmed.

“All right. I—”

“Inspector Cotta!” A police officer waved Cotta to him.

“One moment.” The inspector disappeared, leaving the three of them behind.

“Hey, Bob!” said Pete with a grin. “You were on TV!”

“I know.”

“So tell us!” Jupiter asked Bob. “What exactly happened?”

Bob reported in detail about his meeting at the bank. There wasn’t much to tell. Everything had happened so quickly that it seemed like a bad dream. Only the bank robber’s face, the deep set eyes, the bushy black beard, had dug deep into his memory.

“And before I could even figure out what happened, the police were here and a short time later, the TV,” Bob concluded.

“Sharon Lockwood,” Pete moaned. “I would have loved to be interviewed by her.”

“Anyway, I have to do my shopping again,” Bob remarked. “The milk bottles are broken.”

Jupiter enterprisingly rubbed his hands. “And in the meantime, we’ll figure out how to proceed in this case.”

“Not at all!” Inspector Cotta had appeared unnoticed behind The Three Investigators and looked at them seriously. “You will take no action whatsoever in this case, do you understand me? This is a matter for the police. The manhunt is on and I’m sure we’ll soon apprehend the bank robber. There’s absolutely nothing for you three to do! Have I made myself clear?”

“Yes, Inspector Cotta,” Pete said, looking down.

“Fine. You two should probably go home now. Bob, I’m gonna have to ask you to come down to the station. A sketch artist will make a picture of the bank robber based on your description. I’ll also need to get your statement taken.”

“Okay. See you later, fellas.” Bob waved to his two friends.

“See you at Headquarters,” Jupiter said.

Silently, Jupiter and Pete watched as Bob and Inspector Cotta got into the patrol car and drove away.

For the rest of the day, Jupiter and Pete took position at Headquarters and waited for Bob. Their headquarters were located at Jupiter’s uncle Titus Jones’s salvage yard. From the outside, it was nothing more than an old mobile home trailer that had been gathering dust for years. But appearances are deceiving. Inside was a fully furnished office with telephone connection, computer and a small photo and crime lab in the back of the trailer. Over time, The Three Investigators had collected and repaired furniture and equipment from the salvage yard that made Headquarters a tastefully daring but equally cosy place.

The sun had already set when Bob finally arrived.

He looked exhausted. Tired, he dropped himself into one of the chairs and ran his hair through.

“So?” Pete asked curiously. “How was it?”

“Exhausting. I had to put everything on record. I didn’t know it could take half an hour to describe a single minute. Total nonsense. After all, there are cameras in the bank that recorded the entire robbery. Well...”

“And the sketch?” Jupiter asked.

Bob’s face lit up a little. “An exciting affair. Cotta and I sat down in front of the computer and started the Identikit program. It contains a thousand different images of noses, mouths, eyes, eyebrows, hair and so on. And I had to select the ones that most closely matched the perpetrator. It wasn’t that easy.”

“Did it work?” Pete asked.

“I thought so. But then Cotta put the individual parts together and suddenly the picture didn’t look like the bank robber at all. It was somehow totally warped.”

“The human face is simply more than the sum of its parts,” said Jupiter.

“Right. And that’s why the sketch artist came along. He asked me what exactly was wrong and then drew a drawing of the image on the monitor and my corrections... This one.” Bob pulled a note from his pocket, unfolded it and put it on the desk. Jupiter and Pete bent over it curiously.

It was a copy of the sketch. The drawing was so detailed, it almost looked like a photograph. A man with black hair, black full beard, thin lips and high cheekbones, and had bright, piercing eyes.

“Fascinating,” Jupiter thought.

“This picture will be on the news tonight on all the major networks,” Bob said. “Police suspect that the bank robber may have shaved off his beard in order to avoid being recognized so quickly. This must of course be taken into account when searching for him.”

Jupiter covered the mouth with his flat hand and tried to imagine the face without the beard. His other hand automatically moved to his lower lip and began to work on it. This is what Jupiter always did when he concentrated. Then he threw the crucial question into the room: “And how do we proceed now?”

Pete jammed in. “Excuse me? What do you mean by how do we proceed now?”

“Well... for this case!” Jupe exclaimed.

“Nothing at all!” Pete promptly replied. “Did you not hear what Inspector Cotta said? We have no involvement on this matter.”

“Since when do we listen to what Cotta says?” Jupiter said.

“As of today,” Pete decided. “Because I have little desire to mess with him. He’s already annoyed with us. And he’s been like that a lot lately. If we keep this up, we’ll end up making him an enemy instead of a friend.”

Bob nodded. “I agree with Pete. Besides, we don’t stand a chance anyway. We can’t compete with the police’s methods of investigation.”

“Maybe not that,” Jupiter admitted. “But we are much smarter.”

“And what does that get us?” Bob asked. “We haven’t got a clue. Just this sketch. Do you want to get in a car and drive across California hoping to see this man somewhere in the middle of the road?”

“No.”

“Then what?” Bob questioned.

“I don’t know yet!” said Jupiter, slightly annoyed. “I have to think about it.”

“Think well,” Bob replied. “But without me. I have to go home.”

“Already? You just got here.”

“Yes. But I promised my parents I wouldn’t stay long. My mother, of course, heard about the bank robbery. And now she’s worried. She thinks like Cotta that we’re in the middle of an investigation and that’s why I got involved in the bank robbery. I’ve assured her a thousand times that it was pure coincidence, but she’s still sceptical.”

“Our reputation precedes us.” Pete shook his head. “You can’t even witness a bank robbery in peace, and already you’re a suspect. What a world this is...”

Bob said goodbye and Pete also made his way home. The next day, there was a class test and he wanted to study for it. At least that’s what he said. But Jupiter knew his friend well enough to know that he would probably just take a quick look at the books and then turn to more important things in his eyes—a little jogging or cycling, for example... or weight training. These were the same abstruse things that Pete did in his spare time.

Jupiter stayed behind alone at Headquarters—and thought. The bank robbery couldn’t get out of his head. In Bob’s and Pete’s eyes, it may have all been a coincidence. For Jupiter, it was destiny. This case was crying out to be solved by The Three Investigators, no matter what Cotta said.

But then Jupiter had to admit to himself that Bob and Pete were right—they didn’t have the slightest lead to follow. As much as Jupiter pondered about it, he simply had no idea how to go on. How would they catch a bank robber? Was he already so mentally rusty that he could not find a solution to this comparatively simple problem?

Jupiter spent two hours brooding at Headquarters. Then he remembered that he too had a normal school day tomorrow and should not go to bed too late. Sighing, he got out of his chair, switched off the light and went to the door of the trailer. Then he heard a rattling noise. He paused. That noise came from outside the salvage yard. Was someone sneaking around? Anyway, the main entrance to the salvage yard was already locked and there was a high fence around the yard.

Jupiter listened for a moment, then shrugged. Probably just another cat hunting mice among the piles of junk. He stepped out of the trailer into the cool night air. There, he glanced over to the home of the Jones family. His uncle and aunt had probably gone to bed, as there was no light in the house.

Just as he was about to leave the salvage yard, he noticed a movement out of the corner of his eye. A shadow! It was much bigger than a cat. Someone had been hiding behind a mountain of old cupboards. Jupiter froze. Was it a burglar? What should he do now? He didn't have time to come up with a plan. Suddenly, a dark voice whispered from the shadows.

“Do not be frightened! Bob Andrews?”

“No,” Jupiter replied hesitantly. “Who are you?”

“Who are you?”

“I am Jupiter Jones and I will call the police immediately if you cannot explain to me what you are doing here.”

Silence.

“Come out into the light so I can see you!” Jupiter demanded.

The man stepped out of the shadows into the moonlight. The light was dim, but it was enough to see his face. Jupiter stumbled back in horror. He knew the man. He had spent the last two hours staring thoughtlessly at his face.

It was the bank robber!

3. The Unequal Brothers

Jupiter narrowed his eyes. The beard was missing, but there was no doubt about the same shaggy hair and the same bright eyes. It was the man from the police sketch.

Jupiter had to alert the police! But he had to do it as discreetly as possible, else the bank robber would smell something fishy. So how could he do that?

“Huh... Excuse me, I thought you were someone else for a moment,” said Jupiter.

His counterpart pulled a sore face. Almost like a smile. “You thought I was the man who robbed a bank today.”

Jupiter flinched. Now what? Run away? He turned around and ran back into Headquarters. In a rush, he stumbled over a stack of empty boxes. They toppled over and blocked the way for his pursuer. Finally, he reached the door to the trailer! He pulled out his bunch of keys, looking for the right key. His fingers trembled. He dropped it.

Blast it!

The bank robber had meanwhile overcome the cardboard barrier and was running towards him with giant strides. Finally, the padlock was opened. Jupiter ripped it from the latch, slipped through the door and...

The door was torn from his hand just as he was about to close it from the inside. The man crashed into the trailer.

Jupiter groped desperately for a weapon, something he could defend himself with... Pete’s baseball bat in the corner! But before his hand could get anywhere near him, his opponent had already overpowered him.

With an iron grip, he grabbed Jupiter’s wrists and pressed them against the wall, pressing his knees into Jupiter’s thigh so that he could no longer move. Eye to eye they were facing each other, their faces only a few centimetres apart. Jupiter felt the warm breath on his skin. He forced himself to rest. The escape strategy had not worked. He should have thought so. Then he guessed that now it was time for Plan B—diplomacy.

He looked the man right in the eye. “What do you want from me?”

“I just want you to stay calm.” The man’s voice was surprisingly soft.

“Then what?”

“Then you listen to me, Jupiter Jones,” the man said. “You are the leader of The Three Investigators, aren’t you? ... Just the one I wanted to see.”

Jupiter started. The Three Investigators? How did he know?

“You think you know who I am,” the man continued.

“As you said, you are the man who robbed the Elf Bank in Rocky Beach today and stumbled over my friend Bob Andrews’s bicycle while fleeing,” Jupiter said calmly.

The man shook his head calmly. “Wrong. I only look like the bank robber.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let me explain.” Completely out of the blue, the man let him go.

Jupiter was free. The baseball bat! If he was fast, he could hit the man and call the police. But he did not. The man had simply let him go. Why?

“Thank you,” Jupiter said.

“You can always call the police if you think I’m lying.” The man seemed to have guessed his thoughts.

Jupiter nodded. “Go to the other corner of the trailer!”

The man hesitated for a moment, but then he obediently trotted through Headquarters and took position as far away as possible. Jupiter reached for the baseball bat.

“Just for safety,” he explained. “Now tell me who you are and what you want from me.”

He nodded. “My name is Jeremiah King. I live in Pasadena and I work there as an insurance salesman. I have a small house, wash my car on Saturdays and mow the lawn in my garden once a month. Everything is very... Atchoo!”

“Gesundheit,” Jupiter said.

“Thank you. Everything is quite normal. Or at least it was—until tonight... until I saw a report on TV about the bank robbery in Rocky Beach, and a sketch of the perpetrator.

Fortunately, Bob Andrews and The Three Investigators were mentioned by name. Otherwise I wouldn’t have known what to do. Well, to tell you the truth, I’m not quite sure yet. Maybe coming here was a bad idea. But if you’re as good a detective as your reputation, maybe you can help me.”

Jupiter was confused. Had Jeremiah King said what it was all about yet? “About what, Mr King?”

“To find my brother.”

“Your brother?”

“Yes. Jonathan King,” Jeremiah King said. “Oh, didn’t I mention that? It was my brother who robbed the bank. Not me.”

Jupiter raised his eyebrows in surprise and wondered whether he should believe King. “Your resemblance is striking.”

“We’re identical brothers. He’s twelve minutes older.”

“Dead ringers!” Jupiter remarked.

Jeremiah nodded, followed by a sneeze.

“Gesundheit,” repeated Jupiter. “So your brother robbed a bank today, which you learned about from the news.”

“Exactly. For the last few months, I’ve always feared he’d make a huge mistake. But I never imagined that the stupidity would be so great. I am completely at a loss. I want to help him, but I have no idea where he is!”

“Start at the beginning,” Jupiter asked and he relaxed a little.

He put the baseball bat back in the corner. There it was still within reach, but Jupiter no longer believed that he would need the weapon.

“Jonathan and I look exactly alike, but our personalities could not be more different. My older brother has always been someone who got into trouble quickly. A bit of a mess. He never had a real job, was in debt and got into trouble regularly.

“I always helped him as much as I could, but at some point I just couldn’t do it any more. He was in too much debt. In the last few weeks, I repeatedly told him that he should finally find a decent job and gradually build up a normal life. But he just laughed hysterically and said it was too late for that. He had to find another way out.” Mr King lowered his head.

“I should have confronted him about what he meant by that, but I didn’t. That was a mistake. By now, I know what other way out he was talking about—he robbed a bank. I blame myself. If I had realized in time how serious his situation was, I could have stopped him.”

“And now you fear that you could be mistaken for the culprit,” Jupiter suspected, when King did not speak further.

“Sorry? No, no, it’s not about that at all. I can prove to the police beyond a shadow of a doubt that I’m not the robber, after all I was in the office at the time of the crime.”

“Then what do you want from me?” Jupiter asked. “Why did you come here?”

“The TV said that a boy saw the perpetrator. Bob Andrews. One of the famous Three Investigators. I’ve read about you in the papers, you know. And at that moment, I thought maybe you could help me. Atchoo!”

“Gesundheit.”

“Are there any chemicals stored around here?” Jeremiah wondered.

“Behind the door, next to which you are standing, is our photo lab,” Jupiter said.

Jeremiah nodded. “This must be it. I’m allergic to photo chemicals.”

“How do you want us to help you?”

“To find my brother before the police do,” Mr King explained. “The fact is, Jonathan is not entirely unknown to the police. If they catch him, he’ll go to jail for a long time, I’m sure. I don’t think there’s anything that can be done about that anyway. But he could limit the damage if he turns himself in voluntarily.”

Jupiter nodded. “That is likely. In court, a milder sentence is often handed down if the offender confesses his guilt.”

“Exactly. But he’ll never do it on his own. He’s far too stubborn for that. I’m sure he thinks he can get away with the money. But sooner or later, a bank robber always gets caught —one hundred percent. I have to talk some sense into him. I’m the only one he might still listen to. I could change his mind and get him to turn himself in.”

“But I have to find him first. And I have to find him before the police do. That’s why I came to you. After all, your friend Bob saw my brother. So I thought... well, you’re detectives.”

“But why did you turn up here like that?” Jupe asked.

“That... I’m sorry. I guess I was as surprised as you are. I left Pasadena way too late. When I got here, everything was already dark. But I didn’t want to have made the way for nothing, so I climbed over the fence and looked around a bit because I thought maybe someone is still here. And then suddenly you were standing in front of me. I knew you recognized me and I was afraid you’d call the police right away.”

“That was my plan,” Jupiter admitted.

“And I wanted to prevent that. Sooner or later the police will turn up at my place anyway, after all I resemble my brother to the hair. But before I have to explain myself to them, I wanted to talk to you first.”

Jupiter took a deep breath. “That’s an amazing story, Mr King. But suppose I believe you and we really are looking for your brother, what guarantee do we have that he will be brought to justice? You could run away with him instead of persuading him to turn himself in.”

“I can only give you my word. But of course you can take all the necessary precautions. You must do what you think is right. However, I believe that everyone deserves a second chance. And if Jonathan does not turn himself in voluntarily, you can always call the police. But like I said, you’re gonna have to find him first.”

Jupiter shook his head. “No, Mr King. First, we have to decide whether we would want to take on the case.”

“That’s right. So? Will you do it?”

“I bet my racing bike that you said ‘yes’,” said Pete when they met the next day at Headquarters after school.

Jupiter stretched out his hand. "Would you please hand me your bike keys?"

"Are you telling me you said 'no'?"

"No."

"So, yes."

"No."

"No or yes?"

"Neither. I asked for one day to think it over," Jupiter said. "After all, I wanted to discuss the matter with you first."

"That's something new," Pete thought. "Since when are we asked for our opinion?"

"You know Jupe," Bob said. "He always asks us questions... but he just doesn't usually care about our answers."

Jupiter grumbled sullenly. "Is that your opinion of me? Of course your answers are important to me! Would you please tell me what you think of the matter?"

"I don't know," mumbled Pete. "I can't help it, somehow the whole story sounds strange."

Bob nodded. "Me too."

"You're right," Jupe agreed. "But, of course, there's only one way to find out what is so strange about it."

Pete rolled his eyes. "In plain English, we're taking the case."

Jupiter smiled. "You got it again."

4. The Hitchcock Virus

“There’s only one problem,” Bob remarked.

“Which is what?” Jupiter asked.

“We thought about looking for the bank robber last night,” Bob began.

“And found that we have no chance of finding him,” Pete continued. “Because we have no clue where he’s hiding. So what makes you think we’ll be able to track him down after all, Jupe?”

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. “At least we now know his name—Jonathan King. That’s something we can work on.”

“Do you think we should just look in the phone book?” Pete asked.

“No. But we’ll squeeze it out from his brother,” Jupiter replied. “Make him tell us everything he knows about Jonathan. Maybe it’ll lead us to something.”

“So, how to you contact this Jeremiah?” Pete remembered. “Do you have his number?”

“He promised to come by this afternoon to hear our decision.” Jupiter looked at his watch. “In 15 minutes.”

“He... he’s coming here?” cried Pete. “You mean here at Headquarters?”

“Don’t panic, Pete. He’s harmless. At least he was yesterday.”

Pete’s face darkened. “So you had already made a decision. No matter what we said, that Mr King would have come here anyway.”

Jupiter was spared an answer, because at that moment there was a knock at the door. “Come in!”

Jeremiah King entered Headquarters. “Sorry, I’m a little early. I hope I’m not disturbing you.”

“Don’t worry, we just finished our meeting.” Jupiter introduced his two colleagues to the visitor.

While Pete took a quick glance at their new client, Bob looked at the man carefully.

“Is... is something wrong?” Mr King asked Bob.

“Excuse me, sir, but you really do look so much like your brother, even without the beard,” Bob said, fascinated.

“We are genetically identical.” Jeremiah smiled. “So, have you come to a decision yet?”

“We have.” Jupiter opened the desk drawer, pulled out a small cardboard card and handed it to Mr King. It said:



“We’ll take the case,” Jupiter said solemnly.

“That’s what I was hoping for,” Mr King said. “How are you gonna do it?”

“First, you must give us any information about your brother that might help us determine his current whereabouts. For example, his address. He will most likely no longer be at home, but his apartment or house could still provide important clues.”

Mr King cleared his throat. “His address,” he repeated, scratching his chin. “Well, how can I... shall I... Atchoo!”

“Gesundheit.”

“It’s those chemicals from your photo lab again.”

“Maybe we’d better go outside,” Bob suggested.

“This will be the best thing,” Mr King agreed.

“So where does your brother live?” the First Investigator continued the discussion as they stood in the sunny salvage yard.

“Yeah, well, the problem is... I don’t have his address.”

Jupiter frowned. “Sorry? But you’ve had contact with your brother.”

“Well, let’s just say he’s been in contact with me. Sometimes he called me or visited me. But he would never tell me where he lived. He probably feared that his twelve-minute-younger brother would get too involved in his life. You know, in my family I stood for order, he for chaos.”

“But you must have some idea where he lives.”

King smiled sheepishly. “Unfortunately not. Somewhere in California, that’s all I know.”

“If he came to see you, did he come by car, by plane, by train, by whatever?” Jupiter probed further.

“He came by car. And he always stayed in a little hotel in Pasadena.”

Jupiter’s ears were wide open. “He didn’t stay at your place, but in a hotel?”

“I only have a very small apartment with no extra bed, that’s why.”

“What’s the name of this hotel?”

“Orange View. It’s on the northern edge of town, near the orange groves.”

“And when was the last time he stayed there?”

“Wait a minute, that must have been a month ago.”

Jupiter no longer answered. He stared into space, slowly working on his lower lip.

“What is it, Jupe?” Pete asked. “Do you have an idea how we can track down Jonathan King?”

“Possibly,” murmured the First Investigator. “But it won’t be easy.”

“Spit it out!” Pete cried.

Jupiter ignored him and turned to Jeremiah. “Mr King, can you think of anything else that might help us find your brother? Has he perhaps mentioned a place where he often goes? Or names of friends? Do you know anyone in his circle?”

“I’m afraid not. I’ve already called every friend I could think of. They don’t know anything either.”

“All right. Maybe I’ll come back to this.” Jupiter continued. “But before that, we’re going on another trail. How can we reach you?”

Jeremiah King wrote his mobile phone number on a piece of paper and handed it to the First Investigator.

“We haven’t discussed your fee.”

“We investigate for free,” Jupiter said, not without pride in his voice. “If we can help you and your brother, that would be our reward.”

When Mr King had left, Pete looked doubtfully at the First Investigator. “If we can help you and your brother, that would be our reward,” he mimicked. “Sometimes you really lay it on thick, Jupe.”

“Why? Isn’t it the truth?”

“Sure. But there could be another way to say it,” Pete said. “You’re acting like you’re the Good Samaritan.”

“Aren’t I?”

“No. On the contrary, you are the most selfish person I know. You only solve crimes so that you can bask in the glory of your success. That’s the real reason.”

“Well, that’s fine with me...”

“Well,” Bob interrupted, “I would be much more interested in your idea now, Jupe. The Orange View hotel has got you wondering something. Why?”

“Every guest staying in a hotel must give their personal details, right? And that information will be stored somewhere. In the old days, it was in guest books. Now computers are used. Anyway, all we have to do is to check the guest list at the Orange View and we have Jonathan King’s address.”

“We could also just call them and ask,” Pete thought.

“It’s no use,” Bob replied. “They won’t give out addresses, that’s for sure... for privacy reasons.”

“Right, Bob. I’m afraid we’re gonna have to take a peek at that list.”

“And how are you going to do that?” Pete asked.

“The computer is usually located at the reception desk, a relatively easily accessible place,” Jupiter said. “The only problem with reception desks is that they are manned around the clock to receive guests. So it might be difficult to get in unnoticed.”

“But knowing our great First Investigator Jupiter Jones, of course he already has a plan.” Jupiter nodded happily. “A small, simple but effective plan, yes.”

“Which one?”

“I need the Pasadena yellow pages, the computer, a suitcase and a car.”

Two hours later, Pete parked his red MG in front of the Orange View. The hotel was on the outskirts of the city. The mountain slopes were covered with huge orange trees. From the hotel, there was a beautiful view of Pasadena and the plantations.

Jupiter put on his sunglasses, took the old suitcase they had found at the salvage yard and got out of the car. “You stay here. Ready to go. I don’t think I’ll get caught, but if it comes down to it, I still want to be able to get away as quickly as possible.”

“All right. Good luck, Jupe!” Pete said.

The First Investigator took a deep breath once, then he entered the building. He found himself in a small, friendly foyer. Behind the reception counter, a young man sat at a computer and stared nervously at the screen. Little beads of sweat were on his forehead. Very good, Jupiter thought. The trap has already been sprung! When the receptionist noticed him, he stood up and put on an eager smile.

“Good afternoon. What can I do for you?” he asked.

Jupiter gave his voice a deep sound. “I would like to check into my room. Jupiter Jones is my name.”

“Have you booked the room?” the receptionist asked.

“Yes. But only an hour ago. By computer. I got your e-mail address from the yellow pages.”

“An hour ago. Well, I’m sorry, we’re having a little computer problem right now. I didn’t get your e-mail.”

“Really?” Jupiter leaned over and took a look at the monitor. A big question mark flashed on a black background. It kept changing colour: white-blue-green-blue-white-blue-green. He smiled amused. “I see what you mean. The Hitchcock virus.”

The receptionist looked at him in surprise. “The what?”

“The Hitchcock virus. I assume you unsuspectingly opened an e-mail and suddenly the screen went haywire.”

“Exactly,” the man said. “The screen went black and this stupid question mark appeared and has been driving me crazy ever since. You, uh... You know about this?”

“As a matter of fact, yes,” Jupiter replied with confidence. “I work part-time at a computer retailer and have seen this before.”

“As it is, I can’t run another program. If I don’t correct the problem soon, it’ll be a disaster. All bookings are kept in the computer!”

“That’s no problem,” Jupiter said patronizingly. “The Hitchcock virus creates havoc on your computer, but you can get rid of it pretty quickly.”

The young man bent over conspiratorially. “Would you mind telling me the secret? It would be good if the boss didn’t know about it. I can also offer you a beautiful room with a view of the mountains.”

“I’d prefer a view of the city.”

“As you like!”

“All right. But it’s better if you let me do it myself. It’ll be faster.”

“If... if it’s not too much trouble,” the man said.

“Not at all.”

A moment later, Jupiter was sitting at the hotel computer. He rebooted it. With flying fingers, he deleted the Hitchcock virus he had programmed himself. It happened so fast, the receptionist didn’t even know it happened. It was not surprising as Jupiter knew the code word with which he could render the destructive program harmless.

“Hmm... the problem is bigger than I thought,” he claimed. “The virus has also managed to sneak into several parts of the program. If you want to prevent it from doing more damage there, we have to check them all.”

“If it were... I mean, would you maybe...”

Jupiter looked at him over the edge of his sunglasses.

“Against a second breakfast egg every morning...”

“Of course.”

“Hard-boiled.”

“No problem.”

One after the other, Jupiter called up all programs. Bookings, invoices, administration, guest list. The First Investigator took a close look at everything, typed in some trivialities and made a strained face. It didn’t even occur to the receptionist to take a closer look at the list of guests.

After a quarter of an hour, the work was done.

“There...” Jupiter said. “Everything’s fine again.”

“Thank you very much.”

“You’re welcome,” the receptionist said.

“My booking got lost in the virus attack, though,” Jupiter claimed.

“It doesn’t matter,” the man replied. “We can do it right now.”

“Fine. I’ll just go get the rest of my luggage.”

“As you wish.”

Jupiter rose and strove for the exit. He took the suitcase back with him.

“But you can leave it here,” the receptionist shouted after him.

“Sorry? Oh, yeah!” Jupiter hit his forehead and put the suitcase down again. Whatever.

Uncle Titus wanted to throw it away anyway.

Jupiter left the Orange View, got into the MG and Pete stepped on the accelerator.

5. The Robber's Apartment

“Strange,” Bob muttered with a glance at the road map.

“San Fernando is only thirty-two kilometres from Pasadena. Why does Jonathan King stay at a hotel when he visits his brother?”

“So that Jeremiah would not know that his brother lived very close to him,” Jupiter assumed. “Probably Jonathan just wanted to keep him away and therefore pretended that he had to cross the state of California halfway every time to visit his brother.”

They were on their way to San Fernando. The road wound along the foot of the mountains. To the right was Los Angeles National Park, to the left the endless San Fernando Valley. It was getting dark.

“What do we actually do if Jonathan is there?” Pete asked. “What if he still lives in this apartment and he doesn’t give a damn that the police are looking for him?”

“All the better,” said Jupiter. “Then we have solved the case. We’ll give Mr King his brother’s address and our mission is complete. But to be honest, I don’t think it would be that simple. No one whose picture is in the press will sit at home and wait for the neighbours to report him.”

It took them a while to find the right street where Jonathan lived according to the hotel computer. The house was a flat, elongated complex with dozens of rental apartments.

“It doesn’t look very inviting,” Pete thought. “It’s a scruffy building.”

“Like everywhere else in the neighbourhood,” Bob remarked. “But I’m sure it’s a cheap place to live.”

“Not cheap enough,” Pete said. “Otherwise, Jonathan King wouldn’t have had to rob a bank.”

“Come on, fellas!” said Jupiter. “Let’s take a closer look.”

They got out and headed for the big front door. “There are advantages for a detective to go after someone who lives in a tenement block. There’s no need to sneak through the front yards and bypass motion detectors. There must be a hundred people living here. You can get into the building without any trouble.”

“The door is even open,” Pete noticed and entered the stairwell.

There were endless rows of graffiti-sprayed mailboxes fixed on the wall, most of them dented. Out of some of them the mail was already pouring out from the slot. The Second Investigator let his eyes wander over the name tags. “Here! I found it! ‘J. King’. You were really right, Jupe, our bank robber actually lives in this building.”

“Of course I was right.”

“Now what?” Pete asked.

“Let’s see if he’s home. If the mailboxes are arranged logically, he should be on the second floor.”

They climbed up the stairs and found themselves in a very long hallway. Almost every door was secured with several locks. Just then, a young woman was busy getting into her apartment. With a thick bunch of keys she fiddled with five different locks.

Click, click, click, click.

Then she slipped inside and closed the door behind her in a flash.

Click, click, click, click, click.

“It’s like a maximum security prison,” Pete said and shivered. “Nice neighbourhood.”

“Let’s hope Mr King’s apartment isn’t as secure. Come on!” Jupiter urged.

There was a name plate on each door. The Three Investigators were looking for a specific name. After a bend, the corridor continued for a few metres and ended at a wall. Here the ceiling lighting had failed. It was almost pitch dark. The light was just enough to read the signs.

“What is that there?” Pete asked involuntarily whispering and pointed to a large, dark shadow at the end of the corridor.

Bob moved closer. “Furniture,” he said. “Or rather, junk. Somebody cleaned out the mess and put their stuff in the corridor. Nobody seems to mind.”

“Bingo!” cried Jupiter. “Here it is: ‘J. King’. We’re in luck, fellas—only one lock. But first let’s see if he’s at home.” Jupiter raised his hand to the bell.

“Hey!” Pete held him back. “What if there is really someone there?”

“I’ll think of something.”

Jupiter rang. The muffled buzzing sound came through the door. They waited. Nothing moved. He tried again. Silence.

“No one here. That’s what I thought. So, Pete, over to you.”

The Second Investigator knew what Jupiter meant. Pete was an expert when it came to door locks—and picking them. With the help of his lock pick collection, which he always carried with him, he had helped The Three Investigators out of trouble many times. But from another point of view, this was often the start of more trouble. Of course, Jupiter didn’t care about that.

Pete knelt in front of the lock and looked at it more closely.

“It’s so dark. Doesn’t anyone have a torch?”

“No,” Jupe replied.

“All right, we’ll have to do without one.”

“Can you do it?” Bob asked.

“If you give me a little time, yes. Besides, it’d be good to have someone at the corner as a lookout. I don’t want to be caught here trying to break in.”

Bob returned to the bend and peered into the lighted corridor while Jupiter watched the Second Investigator attentively over his shoulder.

Skilfully Pete scanned the texture of the lock with a thin metal hook. It was not an easy lock, but with a little patience...

“Shh!” Bob whispered. “Someone’s coming!”

Pete immediately stopped working and listened. Footsteps were approaching. Bob ducked around the corner as far as he could. It was a man, but he was still a long way off, across the corridor. Bob fervently hoped that he would stop and disappear into one of the apartments. But he kept walking. Then he was close enough that Bob could see his face.

Bob flinched. Jonathan King! Also, he was without a beard, but without a doubt it was the bank robber! Bob scurried back to his friends. “It’s King! He’s coming here!”

“We gotta go!” Pete turned around. The passage ended at a wall. There was only one escape route and it went past King. “We’ll just go down the corridor,” Pete whispered. “Just like nothing happened.”

“He knows me,” Bob reminded him.

Jupiter had an idea. “Let’s hide behind the pile of junk!”

It was narrow behind the mountain of boxes and old furniture, but darkness was on their side. If Mr King wasn’t heading straight for them, he wouldn’t see them. They, on the other

hand, could see him clearly in the backlight. He turned the corner and walked purposefully toward his apartment door. He looked around once, then crouched down and looked at the lock, just as Pete had done.

He pulled tools from the pocket of his black leather jacket and tampered with the lock. After only ten seconds it made an audible 'click' and the door swung open. Another look in both directions, then King disappeared inside the apartment. The door slowly closed—but the lock did not engage. It was only leaning against the door.

"Now what?" Pete whispered excitedly. "Should we call the police?"

"We promised our client we wouldn't do this," Jupiter reminded him.

"But it's the bank robber!" Pete gasped.

"We're working the case for Jeremiah King, not for the police," the First Investigator insisted. "He just left the door ajar, I guess he'll leave right away. And then two of us should be chasing him."

"And the third?" Pete asked.

"... Is you, Pete. As soon as we leave, try again and search the apartment."

"Then what?"

"That could be important. You know—" A loud rumbling interrupted the First Investigator. It came from King's apartment. It was like a chair had fallen over. The sound repeated. Jupiter left his guard and stepped to the apartment door.

"Jupe!" hissed Pete. "Are you stupid?"

The First Investigator raised his hands reassuringly. He just wanted to get a little closer to listen. And maybe take a look. Just a little look, of course. Now he was right outside the door. The sound was unmistakable. King was ravaging something in there.

Carefully, Jupiter peeked through the crack. He didn't see anything. But it sounded like King was in the next room. So Jupiter opened the door wide enough and slipped through into the living room. It was sparsely furnished, nothing special.

The drawer had been torn out of a small desk and the contents were scattered on the floor. It was dark, but the flickering light of a flashlight came through the door to the next room. Then an ugly rattle sounded as if from fabric tearing. Then it was followed by an angry growl and a muffled voice: "Where is he?"

Okay, that was enough. Jupiter had seen enough. He had better disappear before he was discovered. The First Investigator returned to the corridor and hid with his friends.

Pete breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh, boy, Jupe! You're really killing me!"

"Did you see anything?" Bob asked.

"King is looking for something. He's turning the whole place upside down. He seems to be in quite a hurry, because he's not being particularly careful... but he's even more ruthless."

The rumbling in the apartment went on for a while, then all of a sudden it was quiet. The Three Investigators listened.

Suddenly, King rushed out the door and threw it behind him. He ran down the corridor and a moment later disappeared around the corner. "What's the matter now?"

"I don't know, but we'll figure it out. Quick, Bob, after him! Good luck, Pete!"

Bob and Jupiter pursued the fugitive, Pete was left behind alone. Oh, great. He wasn't comfortable with it at all. These kinds of actions were not his cup of tea and usually he only let himself be talked into them. But now he was on his own.

"All right," he murmured. "Let's do it."

Once again, he worked on the door lock. This King had got it open in no time at all, so it couldn't have been that difficult. After a minute, Pete succeeded. The door opened.

Although he knew that there was no one else in the apartment, he crept in like a burglar. As a matter of fact, he was one. He'd better not to turn on the light. Jupiter was right—the apartment was trashed. What was he supposed to look for in this mess? If only Jupiter had stayed here, he would certainly have known where to start.

Perplexed, Pete let his gaze wander through the room. He went to the window and looked out. In the meantime, the three must have reached the bottom. But on the street, Pete saw something completely different—police. Two patrol cars stood there!

Two patrol cars—and King had fled. The police were on their way here! And Pete was a burglar in a bank robber's apartment! Very quickly, he decided to get out of here! The Second Investigator rushed out to the corridor, closed the door and ran.

He was on the corridor and not a second too soon, heavy footsteps were approaching. Now keep calm! As calmly as possible, Pete turned the corner. Four policemen came towards him. Pete acted as surprised as possible without appearing conspicuous. On the other hand, was it appropriate to be surprised at all? Perhaps it was the order of the day in this building for the police to show up. The men paid no attention to him. When they were out of sight, Pete took a step. He had to get out!

Out on the street, he took a deep breath. That was a close call. He walked past the patrol cars to his MG parked one street away. Wait a minute—his car! Bob and Jupiter should have taken it to go after Jonathan King! If so, how was he supposed to get back to Rocky Beach now?

But when he went around the corner, to his amazement, the MG was still there. And Jupiter and Bob were there. They just looked at him speechlessly.

“Hey! What's going on?” Pete asked, surprised. “Where's King? Why didn't you follow him?”

“Because we're idiots,” growled Bob.

“What?” Pete wondered.

“You have the car keys,” explained Jupiter. “Unfortunately, we only realized this when we were downstairs. King got into a car and took off. It was by far the shortest chase in our entire detective career.”

“Oh, no,” Pete cried.

“Oh, yeah,” Bob remarked.

“The police showed up,” Pete reported.

“We saw that,” Jupe said.

“That's why King disappeared so quickly,” Pete said. “Luckily I saw them in time, or they would have grabbed me.”

“Probably a neighbour saw the Identikit picture in the newspaper or on television and informed the police,” Jupiter suspected. “Unfortunately, they came a little too late.”

“Well, we failed as well,” Bob said and kicked a pebble furiously. “Jonathan King is long gone and we have no idea where he's hiding. He will not be coming back for sure after the police have located his whereabouts.”

Jupiter nodded thoughtfully. “Almost right, Bob.”

“Almost right? What do you mean?” Bob asked.

“There's a slight mistake in your reasoning.”

“Really? Are you smarter than both of us combined?” Bob wondered.

“Looks that way.” Jupiter took a meaningful break. “Doesn't it strike you as a little odd that Jonathan King should break into his own apartment with a lock pick instead of just using his key? And then vandalizes his own furniture because he's looking for something?”

“You... you mean...” Bob gasped.

“Exactly. The man we just saw was not Jonathan King.”

6. The Charms of Mystery

“Are you really one hundred percent sure it was him, Bob?” Pete asked for at least ten times during their return trip to Rocky Beach.

“How many times do I have to say it? He looked like Jonathan King. Or Jeremiah King. Whatever.”

“It couldn’t have been Jonathan King,” Pete said for sure. “Jupe is absolutely right. No one would break into his own apartment and then smash it half to pieces.”

“But it can’t be Jeremiah either,” Bob said. “Or can anyone explain why he is giving us the job to look for his brother when he already knows where he lives? And why would he break in there? What was he looking for? None of this makes sense. Say something, Jupe!”

Jupiter had remained silent in thought for most of the journey. So far he had not come to any conclusion. But he had a hunch. “There are only two possibilities—either it was Jonathan, who for some reason did not have his key with him and was therefore forced to pick the lock.”

“Then why is he ransacking his apartment?” Pete asked.

“Because he was looking for something and time was running out. Maybe he knew the police were on their way,” Jupiter surmised.

“And the second option?” Bob asked. “It wasn’t Jonathan. It was Jeremiah playing a double game.”

Pete pulled a doubting face. “What kind of game is this?”

“I have absolutely no idea,” Jupiter said. “Nevertheless, I am more willing to believe the second theory. I don’t know, I don’t really trust Jeremiah. We should be very careful with him in the future.”

It was already after ten when The Three Investigators reached The Jones Salvage Yard.

“I’m dead tired,” moaned Pete. “It’s been a busy day.”

“I don’t suppose you are going home now?” Jupiter asked in surprise.

“Why not?”

“Because we urgently need to hold a briefing. After all, we need a plan for tomorrow.”

“All right,” Pete agreed. “But half an hour, tops. I really have to go to bed soon. There’s school tomorrow, remember?”

They entered the salvage yard through Red Gate Rover, their secret entrance hidden in the wooden fence. At Headquarters, Pete tiredly dropped into an armchair. He was hoping that the other two would discuss the matter, as he simply wanted to switch off. Anyway, he was much too tired and he couldn’t think anymore.

“So, what have we got?” Bob began. “An escaped bank robber and his twin brother, who wants to keep him out of jail.”

“Also, a break-in at the apartment,” Jupiter continued. “Option A—committed by himself. Option B—committed by his brother. Both make sense only with the help of very constructed theories.”

“The question is—how do we behave towards Jeremiah King now? Should we tell him the whole truth?” Bob asked.

“No,” Jupiter decided. “We will tell him about our success at Orange View. And our visit to San Fernando. But we won’t tell him that we saw the burglar. We’ll say we arrived just as the police showed up. This is close enough to the truth and at the same time far enough away from it so that Jeremiah will not suspect anything in case he really was the burglar.”

“Agreed,” Bob said.

“But we still have a problem,” Jupe continued.

“Yeah?” Bob wondered. “What’s that?”

“The police,” Jupiter said. “They are also on the bank robber’s trail, and today we barely missed them. If we run into the police again and Cotta finds out we’re working on this case, there’ll be trouble.”

“We should be happy,” Pete joined the discussion. “If the police solve the case, so much the better, we won’t have to take the rap.”

Jupiter looked at the Second Investigator reproachfully and said: “But our mission is to find Jonathan King before the police do, remember?”

“No,” Pete replied irritably. “You no longer trust our client. Admit it, Jupe, your only concern is your detective’s honour. That’s all you care about in this case. Is it not?”

“Well... I...”

“True or not?” Pete demanded.

“I admit that the charms of mystery accounts for an insignificant percentage of my motivation.”

Pete tried to stop himself from laughing, but did not quite manage it. “You are simply incredible, Jupe. I’m going home anyway. You can discuss the charms of mystery until tomorrow morning if you want. My head is throbbing.” He jumped out of his chair. “Good night, everyone.”

“Good night, Pete!” Jupiter said.

The Second Investigator left Headquarters and walked across the dark yard towards Red Gate Rover. Although he was here almost every day and often didn’t go home until after dark, the salvage yard still gave him the creeps at night. The mountains of rumble in the moonlight looked a bit like sleeping monsters. And since new junk was constantly being added and old ones disappeared, the surroundings changed almost daily. And someone or something could hide behind a pile of junk. Even today, he let his gaze wander attentively over the bizarre silhouettes when he suddenly discovered something.

There was something at the wrought-iron entrance gate. Something that did not belong there. Curious, Pete stepped towards it. It was a large envelope. It had been pushed through the bars and taped down. With a thick black pencil someone had drawn three big question marks on it. Pete took the envelope off, turned it indecisively back and forth and returned to Headquarters.

“Hello?” Bob wondered. “Forget something?”

“No. We have mail. Look, this was stuck to the gate.” He handed the envelope to the First Investigator.

“I don’t remember anything sticking there when we arrived,” mumbled Jupiter.

“Me neither,” Bob said. “Why don’t you open it?”

“I’m on to it.” Jupiter loosened the tab, reached into the envelope and pulled out a piece of paper. It was a large black-and-white photograph. It was blurry and streaky, like someone was photographing a TV picture. It showed a man dressed in black carrying a large, flat object. It looked like a picture wrapped in a blanket. The photo had been taken from above at an angle. Jupiter spontaneously thought of a surveillance camera that had caught a burglar in

the act. The man's face was hardly recognizable. Nevertheless, the three of them had the same suspicion.

"The dark curls..." Pete murmured. "And the black beard... Are you thinking the same thing as me?"

Bob nodded. "Looks a lot like Jonathan King. But the picture didn't come from the bank. What's he holding there? A picture frame?"

"Looks like it."

"The question is not who the man in the picture is or what he is wearing, but who sent us this photo... and why." Jupiter looked inside the envelope, but there was nothing else inside. Then he turned the photo over. "Look! Someone has written something behind it!"

"Tricia Wilson, 25 Washington Drive, Malibu," Bob read the clean handwriting. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"That a Miss Wilson sent us this picture," Jupiter suspected. "A photo of a man who looks a lot like our bank robber carrying something away. Most puzzling."

"So what now?" Pete asked.

"It's obvious. We'll pay Miss Wilson a visit."

The Second Investigator stared at him in horror. "Now?"

"Not now. Don't worry, Pete, although I sometimes succumb to the charms of mystery, I am well aware that a healthy mind produces higher quality results in a healthy, well-rested body."

"Uh..."

"We'll go tomorrow."

Malibu Beach was not far away from Rocky Beach, so The Three Investigators were able to set off on their bikes the next day after school.

Jupiter had been in favour of driving by car, but Pete had insisted on the sporty version. "Anything less than twenty kilometres away can easily be done by bicycle," he had said. "It's the only way to get rid of your bacon rolls, chubby!"

Even though Jupiter was in charge in most cases—after all he was the First Investigator—he had never been able to prevail against Pete on these points. He was simply the strongest. So Jupiter panted his lungs out on the coastal road in the blazing afternoon sun, at least to keep up with Bob. He didn't have a chance against Pete anyway. With his racing machine, the Second Investigator raced over the mountains as if it was going downhill all the time.

Three quarters of an hour later, they had finally reached their destination—Washington Drive—a hardly frequented street in the most noble area of Malibu. The house with the number 25 was a small white Spanish-styled villa, which was located behind a high, artfully forged steel fence.

Pete was impressed. "That's quite a barrier."

"With barbed wire," Bob noted. "It may not look so fancy now, but it's completely burglar-proof. Hope somebody's here."

They chained their bikes to the fence and went to the gate. A name was engraved on a golden bell shield—'Tricia Wilson'.

Jupiter pushed the button. At once, loud barking dog came to them.

"Something's coming," Pete said, and he involuntarily took a step back when a huge black Doberman raced across the property towards them. He jumped up at the gate and yelped at The Three Investigators.

"Tricia Wilson seems to be a person who is very concerned for her safety."

“Yes, please?” a voice came from the intercom.

“Good afternoon, my name is Jupiter Jones. Are you Tricia Wilson?”

“Yes.”

“My friends and I would like to talk to you.”

“What is it about?”

“About the photo you sent us yesterday. We are The Three Investigators.”

“Sorry? The three what?”

“The Three Investigators. You know, the photo.”

“Hold on.” The voice communication was interrupted.

They waited. After about a minute, the front door opened and a young woman came out. Her clothes—loose-fitting trousers and a baggy lumberjack shirt with sleeves rolled up—were smeared with paint from top to bottom. Her hands were stained as well. Her blond hair was tied up.

She emitted a shrill whistle. “Cookie! Heel!” At once the Doberman left The Three Investigators and returned to the woman.

When Tricia Wilson came closer, Jupiter noticed how small she was. He was taller than her by at least a head.

“Who are you?” she asked gruffly.

“The Three Investigators,” Jupiter repeated and handed a business card through the grating. She studied it carefully.

“If I’m not mistaken, you sent us a photo yesterday,” Jupiter said.

“What photo?” said Miss Wilson with a mixture of anger and curiosity. “I didn’t send anyone a photo recently.”

“This one.” Jupiter took the photo from his bag and showed it to her.

She frowned. “Where did you get this?”

“We thought it came from you,” Pete said. “Your name is on the back.”

She turned it over and the wrinkles deepened. Finally, she said: “I know this photo. Much too good for my taste. But I didn’t send it to you.”

7. The Stolen Mirror

Tricia Wilson's house was confusing. Each room had at least four doors, leaving a seemingly endless number of ways to get from one place to another.

The Three Investigators would probably have got lost within a very short time if she had not showed them the way. Besides, every room was scattered with pictures. Paintings of varying sizes hung on every free wall. Most were unframed and showed abstract forms in white and blue, red and yellow, black and brown.

"I'm an artist," she explained as she led The Three Investigators through the many rooms to the back terrace. Cookie the Doberman trotted along obediently beside her. "Twice a year I have an exhibition in my house here. The next one's in a week, so the place is packed."

From the sunny terrace, one could overlook a part of the city. Between the roofs, the Pacific Ocean flashed up here and there. Next to a small garden table stood an easel with an unfinished painting. The oil paint shone wet.

"It's beautiful here," Bob remarked.

"Yes. But don't think I could afford this house by selling my paintings. I'm a poor artist who was lucky enough to be a stinking rich heiress. Sit down!"

The Three Investigators sat down at the table and Jupiter placed the photo in the middle. "What's this photo about?"

"First, I ask you this—how did you get it?"

"Someone sent it to us yesterday. Because of the address on the back, we thought it was you."

"It wasn't."

"But you know who and what the photo is about," Jupiter suspected.

"I do, indeed. It was taken at my house. In the corridor. And this man is the one who broke into my house a year ago and stole my mirror."

"Your mirror?"

"Yes. What he is carrying under his arm is a mirror wrapped in a blanket."

"Could you start from the beginning," Jupiter asked.

"Why?" she asked briskly.

"Because we're investigating this case."

"Investigate?" A sneering smile played around her lips. "You mean this has to do with a detective game?"

"Quite," Jupiter replied, a bit annoyed.

"And you are investigating the theft of my mirror?"

"No. Our case involves a bank robbery," Jupiter explained. "Perhaps you have heard about it on the radio or television. Two days ago, a bank was robbed in Rocky Beach."

"I don't listen to the news."

"All right." Jupiter realized the only way he could gain Miss Wilson's trust was to be the first to talk. "I will tell you what we know."

He proceeded to tell her about the bank robbery, Mr King's visit and their investigation. He omitted the complicated details about their observations at Jonathan King's apartment. Miss Wilson didn't need to know everything.

“We’re not sure, but the man in the photo appears to be the bank robber. And the fact that an unknown person had sent us this picture while we were investigating the bank robbery suggests that it is indeed the same person and that there is a connection between the cases.”

Tricia Wilson had listened carefully. With her head slightly tilted to the side she sat there and slowly brought her right hand to her mouth. She pinched her lower lip. Pete snorted, and he instantly got a discreet kick from Bob.

Miss Wilson looked at Pete confused. “Something wrong?”

“Uh, no. No. Nothing. I, uh... choked.”

She raised one eyebrow. “Without food?”

“Yes.”

She shook her head, then turned back to Jupiter. “All right, let me tell you what happened a year ago. It was just before an exhibition. An artist friend of mine asked me for my help. He works a lot with videos and planned to create a video collage. For that purpose, he wanted to film the visitors of my exhibition all day long with hidden cameras, assemble the video clips together and make an installation out of them.”

“A what?” Pete said.

“A video installation. A work of art with moving images.” She shrugged her shoulders in unison. “Very experimental and aloof, I know. I didn’t quite understand it either, but among colleagues, one helps one another. So he set up the cameras and started various test runs. For days, different rooms in my house were filmed. One evening, we went out together and forgot to turn off the cameras. When we returned, the mirror had disappeared.”

“What mirror?”

“A five hundred year old Spanish mirror that supposedly belonged to Cortés.”

“You mean Hernán Cortés, the Spanish conquistador?” Jupe asked.

“That’s the one. I heard he had the mirror made especially for him. The frame is made of pure gold and is studded with countless precious stones which he took from the Aztecs at that time. I don’t know if it is really the Cortés mirror, probably it is just a legend, nobody can verify that anymore anyway. The gold and the gems are definitely real.”

“So the mirror is very valuable?”

She laughed bitterly. “You can say that again. It was appraised at about a million and a half dollars.”

“A million and a half?” Pete cried louder than he wanted.

“You heard right,” Miss Wilson said. “It has been in my family for countless generations... until a year ago... until it was stolen from me.”

“Was there any security?”

“Of course. But it was not good enough. The burglar disabled the alarm system. Only after that incident did I get Cookie as a guard dog and start turning my house into a fortress.”

“And the cameras?” Jupiter asked.

“The cameras were the only thing the burglar didn’t know about. And they recorded the theft. Not all of them, because they were not installed everywhere, but it was enough to see his face well from some angles. Yeah. Unfortunately it didn’t work. The police watched the video dozens of times, but the recordings were not enough to identify the perpetrator, let alone catch him. There’s still no trace of the burglar or the mirror. There is little chance that he will be found.”

“And the photo we got was taken from the footage?”

“Right. The perpetrator is on his way out. He already has the mirror with him. I’ve seen the video a hundred times, I know the scene by heart.”

“Hmm,” mumbled Jupiter. “The question now is who pinned the photo to our gate? It has to be someone who knows about the mirror theft and could establish a connection to the bank robber. Besides, that person must know that we’re working on the case.”

“There’s exactly one person who could do it,” Bob said. “Jeremiah King.”

“Or his brother,” Pete surmised.

“Wrong,” Jupiter countered. “He doesn’t even know we exist.”

“Maybe so. From the TV,” Bob said.

“Then he still does not know that we are on his trail,” Jupiter clarified. “But whether it is Jeremiah or Jonathan, neither makes any sense at all. Why should one or the other give us a clue to a previous crime? It just doesn’t add up.”

Jupiter turned to Miss Wilson again. “Whoever sent us the photo must have had access to the video. Who has the video clip? Just you and the police?”

She shook her head. “Everyone, I’m afraid. Parts of it—including the piece from which the photo was taken—were broadcast on the news after the break-in.”

Jupiter sighed heavily. “So this doesn’t help us either. It could have been anyone.”

He let his eyes wander to the glistening ocean in the distance. His mind was in chaos. What was this obscure case? The search for a fugitive bank robber had suddenly turned into something much bigger. And he couldn’t understand what was going on.

“Could we see the video?” Jupiter asked.

“Whatever... if that’s what you want.”

“Maybe we’ll find a clue.”

A little later, they were sitting in Tricia Wilson’s living room. She put aside some pictures that were in front of the TV and put the video cassette in. Then she played the recording.

It started with the burglar walking through a room. Cut. Another room. The man shone a flashlight, looked around searching. Cut. The same room. The man put the mirror on a blanket and wrapped it. For a moment, The Three Investigators were able to take a look at the precious work of art before it was covered by the fabric. The burglar lifted it up with effort and carried it out of the picture. Cut. He went down the corridor. This was the part that appeared in the photo they received. Cut. Then the video cassette ended.

“That’s it?” wondered Jupiter.

“Yes. There were only four cameras. Three of them recorded the burglary,” Miss Wilson said. “So? Is it the bank robber?”

All three nodded at the same time. “No doubt about it,” Bob said. “It’s him.”

Pete smiled. “We may not have seen him, but we know his twin brother, after all.”

“You can see him disappearing through the corridor with the mirror. Why was there no recording of how he came in through the corridor?” Jupiter asked.

“Because he came in through the window,” Miss Wilson explained. “But the mirror frame is gold, much too heavy to climb out the same way with. So he turned off the alarm in the house and disappeared through the front door. He was very quick about it. It only took him three minutes from entering through the window to leaving the house, as the video showed us. But in this time he must have deactivated the alarm system on the first floor. The police said only a professional could do it in such a short time.”

Jupiter nodded. “May we borrow the video?”

“What do you hope to gain from this?”

“I don’t know yet.”

"Jupiter is known for his brainstorms," Pete said. "Most of the time he comes up with something great in the most absurd moments, and if he doesn't have all the evidence to prove his theories immediately, he becomes obnoxious."

The First Investigator gave him a disapproving look, but Miss Wilson laughed. "Well, well. You may take the video cassette. The police have long since closed the case and I had given up hope of ever getting the mirror back. Now, if there's any chance of it turning up, I'll be the first person to do what's necessary to get it back."

"We will find the mirror," Jupiter promised. "We will."

"Well, if you haven't got your mouth too full again," Pete said on the way home. "'We will find the mirror.' That's what I hear! Have you ever stopped to think that we might not find it?"

"So far, The Three Investigators have solved every case," said Jupiter confidently—as far as he managed to do so, panting and sweating on the last climb before Rocky Beach.

"Then maybe this is a case we can't solve. That'd be something new," Pete remarked.

"Rubbish," replied Jupiter. He lacked breath to say something more.

While Pete had been talking about how obscure the case was and how little chance they had of solving it, Bob had remained unusually quiet. Then, as they reached the summit and the last steep descent to Rocky Beach lay ahead of them, he said: "May I have a flash of inspiration?"

"Go ahead, Bob. It's boring when Jupe comes up with the ideas," Pete said.

"Has it occurred to you that Jeremiah King has been playing with us all along?" Bob asked.

"In what way?" Pete wondered.

"It could be that this whole evil twin thing is just a way to divert suspicion from himself. Perhaps he doesn't even have a brother. He did it himself." And with those words, Bob pedalled on and raced down into the valley.

8. Video Puzzle

“What do you mean?” Pete cried again and again as he desperately tried to catch up with Bob. But Bob—was faster. “Bob! Wait!”

“No way!” he shouted back laughing over his shoulder. “First one to the salvage yard!”

“You’ll see. I’ll get you!” Pete shifted up a few gears and gave it all he had. His bike was better than Bob’s. He was better than Bob! He worked out every day! And he still couldn’t catch up. Bob dashed down the road like the wind, passed the town sign and chased around the bend towards the salvage yard.

The race lasted for three minutes, then Bob shot through the open gate onto the dusty pitch with a hundred metres lead and made a rapid emergency stop right in front of Headquarters.

“Victory!” he shouted, laughing and raising his arms. “Victory, victory, victory!”

Pete came to a stop next to him. “How did you do that?” he asked, gasping, half in amazement, half in indignation.

“Well, Pete, you’re not all-powerful. And sometimes you need to be put in your place to understand that.”

“Well done. That wasn’t bad.” Pete was still out of breath. But Bob, too, had sweat on his forehead.

“I guess we lost Jupe,” Bob registered calmly.

“Give him another ten minutes,” Pete said with a grin. “Hey, what do you mean, he doesn’t have a brother?”

“Could be. He’s just setting up a dummy trail so we’d chase a phantom.”

“And whose apartment were we in yesterday?”

“In Jeremiah’s,” Bob surmised. “And it was he himself we saw.”

Pete thought about it for a moment. “Doesn’t sound silly. The name plate says ‘J. King’. So it could be either of them. Let’s see what Jupe has to say about this.”

It took a while before the First Investigator showed up. He cycled leisurely into the salvage yard and brought his bike to a halt with a gentle brake.

“Taking your own sweet time coming back?” Pete complained.

“Just because you’re having a childish race doesn’t mean I’m going to let it get to me. Instead, I’ve been thinking about Bob’s theory.”

“Of course,” Pete said.

“I know what was going through your mind, Bob. I’ve had the same thought myself. It just doesn’t make any sense. Because Jeremiah could have made things a lot easier on himself if he hadn’t come to see us in the first place.”

“Right again,” Bob agreed.

“And...” Pete hesitantly began, then his face suddenly lit up. “Hey! What if Jeremiah isn’t Jeremiah, but really Jonathan? What if our client is the bank robber who’s making us look for his twin brother so suspicion falls on the innocent?”

“That makes more sense,” Jupiter confessed. “But it would still mean that Jeremiah broke into his own apartment yesterday. No, fellas, it doesn’t match up front and back.”

Jupiter parked his bike entered the trailer. Like every time, his first look was at the answering machine. The red light was flashing.

“We have a message, fellas,” Jupiter said. He rewound the video cassette and ran it.

“Hello, this is Jeremiah King. I wasn’t able to get to you earlier. I wanted to check if you’ve made any progress. I’m sorry, I’m not available for the rest of the day. The police will be here any minute to take me to the station. Someone tipped off the authorities that I might be the bank robber. Now my alibi has to be checked. I don’t think I can avoid telling the police about Jonathan. Soon they’ll know as much as you do. And then it’s only a matter of time before they find him. Well...” Mr King cleared his throat. “I’ll get back to you in a few days.” The recording ended with a click.

“This would probably remove the last suspicion,” Jupiter noted. “The police will thoroughly investigate Jeremiah’s identity. If he is not Jeremiah King or has no twin brother, this will be revealed within the next few hours.”

“So he was telling the truth,” Bob said. “Which means it wasn’t Jeremiah who broke into the apartment yesterday, but Jonathan himself. So I guess he forgot his key after all.”

“Or the key was lost,” Pete added. “Or misplaced.”

“Or it was stolen from him,” Bob added.

“Anyway,” said Jupiter, “he was looking for something. And very urgently. He had little time, that was why he was so rude with his things. He did not care. He just had to find it quickly, whatever it was, because the police were coming. The question is, did he find it in time? ... I guess not.”

“I don’t think so,” Bob agreed. “He fled before the police reached.”

“And what does that mean?” Jupiter asked and looked expectantly from one to the other. Pete shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. What does it mean?”

“That the object of his desire must still be in the apartment!” Jupiter exclaimed.

“So?” Pete wondered.

“And that it is just waiting to be found by us!” Jupe said.

The Second Investigator opened his eyes. “You... you want to go back there?”

“You got it.”

“Just like that?” Pete asked.

“Why not?”

“Since the police were already in the apartment... how do you know the cops haven’t already found this whatever-it-is?” Pete continued.

“Because the police weren’t looking for whatever-it-is,” Jupiter explained. “They were hoping to arrest Jonathan King in the apartment... or find the stolen money. Nothing else interested them.”

“But if Jonathan King has not yet been caught,” Bob interjected, “then the apartment is probably under surveillance. There’s absolutely no chance of us getting back in there.”

“I don’t think there’s a cop sitting at the front door,” Jupiter said. “He’d scare the bank robber right away.”

“Maybe not that. But there’s bound to be some plain-clothes policemen outside the house watching it,” Bob added.

“So what? You’re looking for a grown man in his forties with black curls—not for three teenagers who probably just want to visit a friend there. There are at least a hundred people staying in that block, remember? We’re not gonna stand out at all.”

“Without me!” Pete cried. “I won’t be a part of this.”

“So,” Jupiter said calmly. “And why not?”

“Because that’s breaking and entering! A felony, you understand?” Pete cried.

“So was it yesterday.”

“Yeah, but today we’ll probably get caught doing it and put away,” Pete insisted.

Jupiter shook his head. “Yesterday we almost got caught because we had no idea that the police were coming. Today we are prepared. It will be much less dangerous.”

“Less dangerous?” Pete remarked. “You must be out of your mind.”

“Come on, Pete. We’re lost without you and your lock picking. You know that.”

“So what? I don’t care,” Pete said. “I don’t want to read the first entry in my criminal record tomorrow. Don’t bother, Jupe, this time you won’t soften me up,” Pete decided. “I’m not going along with this and I’m not going to let you change my mind!”

The burglar lifted the flashlight and shone it across the room. He wrapped the mirror in a blanket and carried it away. He disappeared through the corridor. The recording ended.

Jupiter rewound the video cassette. It was only a minute long. He had watched it at least ten times. Tricia Wilson had asked him what he thought it would do. He had no answer. And he still didn’t know. One minute of video. It wasn’t much. Still, he felt it contained an important clue that everyone had overlooked—Miss Wilson, the police, everyone. It was just a hunch. Something was wrong with that video. An unrest had crept through a nasty little back door into his head and was now hiding there. He just couldn’t get a hold of it.

He didn’t know what was in the video that was bothering him, but there was something. He looked at it again. This time he paid attention to a different detail. Again nothing. By now, he knew every tiny detail of the video recording by heart. The swing of the flashlight over the pictures. The burglar’s brief hesitation as to whether he should perhaps also take one of the paintings. His quick glance at the clock. The skilful packing of the mirror, as if he had practised it a thousand times. Was that what made Jupiter suspicious? That everything happened so quickly? But why should it not be? After all, he prepared for a break-in like this.

The First Investigator sighed and let the cassette rewind again. He had nothing better to do anyway. He waited. And until Bob appeared...

It was already 10:30 pm when Bob finally arrived. And he was not alone.

“Pete!” Jupiter played surprised. “You came after all.”

Jupiter had half expected the Second Investigator to change his mind, but he didn’t want to say anything to jeopardize it.

“Yes, yes,” Pete mumbled and waved away. “Save it. It’s the same thing over and over again. I’m just too good-natured!”

“Be proud of that, Pete,” Bob suggested. “There are so few good-natured people in the world.”

“Stop teasing me or I’ll leave,” Pete warned, quickly changing the subject. “What are you doing, Jupe?”

“I’m watching the video.”

“You’ve seen that many times,” Pete said.

“Yes. By heart. I’ve been watching it over and over for half the night.”

“So?” Bob asked. “Did you find anything?”

“Nothing... although I’m sure there’s something there.”

“Why?” Bob asked.

“I don’t know. It’s a feeling.”

“Let me see it again,” Bob demanded.

Jupiter let the video recording run again. Bob stared attentively at the screen while Pete looked at his fingernails in boredom.

“Well, I don’t see anything there,” Bob confessed. “It’s just a video recording of a burglary. What do you expect to find?”

“I don’t know,” Jupiter replied, slightly irritated.

“Want to bet that Jupiter will get enlightened again, while we are in some kind of trouble somewhere?” Pete smirked. “It’s always like this—fourteen loaded and unlocked rifles are pointed at us; the treasure threatens to sink into the sea forever; the only incriminating evidence has just caught fire; the police are on their way to the wrong place; and somewhere a time bomb is ticking. And in this hair-raising situation, Jupiter Jones calls out: ‘Eureka! I know what is wrong in the video!’ Could we just go now? I haven’t got all night.”

9. Dizzying Heights

“There are two guys sitting in the car over there eating hamburgers,” Pete whispered as he drove his MG past the grubby apartment block. “They could be cops. You’ve seen it on TV. They are on night duty to follow somebody... and they get bored to death by stuffing themselves with fast food.”

“Until suddenly, three very suspicious teenagers appear whom they have seen on television or in the newspaper,” Bob continues the story. “One of them shouts: ‘Hey, aren’t those The Three Investigators?’ And the other one chokes on his hamburger and says: ‘Indeed. If they show up here, something’s wrong. Come on, Sarge, let’s get them!’”

“Stop it, Bob!” Pete cried. “That’s not exactly what I wanted to know.”

“Don’t panic, fellas. It doesn’t have to be cops,” Jupiter said.

“If it’s not them, then they’re just somewhere else,” Pete said gloomily. “It makes no difference to me.”

“There’s a car park up ahead!” Bob pointed.

“Wouldn’t you rather I park our car a little further away?” Pete asked.

“And then walk all the way back to the house?” Bob disagreed. “Don’t you think that’s a little conspicuous? Remember, we’re just three regular guys visiting someone here. Nothing more.”

Pete backed into the car park and The Three Investigators got out. Like last time, there was no problem getting to the apartment block. But the difference was that this time, Pete was even more uneasy. He cast an inconspicuous glance at the two men in the car, which was parked just a few metres away on the other side of the street.

“Did that one just look over at us?” he whispered. “They’re watching us.”

“So what,” Jupiter quipped. “Do we look like Jonathan King?”

They climbed up to the second floor and walked along the long, dimly-lit corridor. The ceiling lighting after the bend had not yet been replaced. It was pitch dark. Pete was counting on being met by at least one armed policeman at Jonathan King’s door. But there was nobody here. The rubbish was still piled up at the end of the corridor. As they knew from experience, there was the perfect hiding place.

Jupiter walked towards it and took a look around the corner. “No one there,” he whispered. “I told you, Pete. Your concern was completely unfounded.”

“Not quite,” Bob objected. “Look. The police have sealed off the apartment.”

The door had been secured with a yellow tape. Bob knew these seals from television—once you tear them off, they don’t stick. And they had to rip them off to open the door. So their intrusion would not go unnoticed. “So now what?”

“Nothing at all,” said Jupiter. “We’re going in anyway.”

“And what about the seal?” Bob asked.

“What about it?” Jupiter countered.

“The police will know we were here,” Bob said.

“The police will know that someone was here. So what?” Jupe said with confidence. “So, Pete, get to work!”

"I don't know, Jupe," Pete murmured. "I really don't feel comfortable. This is a police seal. It means 'Stop! No entry! Get the out of here!' We don't have to break into this apartment, it's probably enough to break the seal to go to jail."

"My goodness, it's just a tape!" Jupiter remarked. "Are you going to give up because of that?" He looked at his friends defiantly.

Both looked down on the ground. No one answered. Jupiter reached for the seal and tore off one of the yellow tapes with a jerk.

Pete gasped in horror. "Are you—"

"So much for that. Now get to work, Pete!"

Reluctantly, Pete pulled out his lock pick case. For a moment, he considered whether he should simply resist Jupe. But what was the point? The damage had already been done. He crouched outside the door. This time it went much faster. After not even half a minute, the lock clicked open. The Three Investigators entered the apartment and closed the door behind them.

"And now what?" Pete asked.

"We must not turn on the lights under any circumstances," Bob warned.

"You'd see it from the street, and if those two guys down there in the car are really cops, they'll be here in no time."

"Right, Bob. Fortunately, the street lights are bright enough for you to see this." Pete laughed bitterly. "Oh, yeah, real festive lighting here. You can see everything."

"We'll get used to it," Jupiter said. "All right, fellas, let's go. The faster we can get out of here, the better."

In Jonathan King's apartment, there was still chaos. The police had left everything as Pete had earlier seen. They looked around aimlessly. Jupiter rummaged through the papers in the drawer of the desk, Bob looked in the pockets of the clothes in the wardrobe and Pete looked at the books on the shelf. Now and then, he looked out of the window. The men were still sitting in the car. Pete hoped they would stay that way.

"What are we looking for?" he asked after a while.

"After anything that might give us a clue to the whereabouts of Mr King, the money or the mirror," Jupe whispered.

"And what might that be?" Pete wondered.

"I don't know. Just keep your eyes open. Notebooks are always very popular... or plane tickets... or even maps."

But no matter how hard they searched, nothing in King's apartment gave them a clue.

"You know what I notice," Bob asked. "This apartment is so impersonal."

"It has been ravaged," Pete replied.

"No, that's not what I mean. There are hardly any personal items. A few books, clothes, a TV, a small stereo with eight CDs, that's it. Do you know what I mean? Jonathan King is about the same age as my parents. The stuff my parents collected in their life is unbelievable! But here, it almost looks like King has just moved in. Or as if this is just his second residence."

"Or a shelter," Jupiter said. "Well observed, Bob. That means he lives somewhere else and may be there now. Look around, see if you can find any papers, insurance documents, IDs or maybe letters sent here with a forwarding order."

They searched further, this time a little more specifically... until finally Jupiter shouted. "Hey! I think I found something that might help us!"

Bob looked up. "What, Jupe?"

"One—" Jupiter began to say something.

“Guys!” Pete interrupted him. “I think there’s trouble.” The Second Investigator stood at the window and looked down.

“There’s somebody standing by the cops’ car telling them something. Now he’s pointing at this window! One of the cops is talking into his radio. Damn! They’re getting out of the car... and they’re walking towards the front door.”

“Someone in the corridor must have seen that the seal was broken,” Jupiter concluded. “Perhaps a neighbour who knew that this apartment was guarded. And now he has alerted them.”

“Razor-sharp analysis, Jupe,” Pete said snappily. “But what do we do now?”

“We have to get out of here,” Jupe decided.

“This time they won’t just let us go,” Pete suspected. “Through the window! There must be a fire escape!”

The Second Investigator opened the window he was standing in front of. There was indeed a fire escape. It was half rusted out and didn’t look very reassuring. But there was no other way. Pete swung one leg out, climbed the ladder and made his way down. Bob and Jupiter followed him. They were hanging right on the wall of the building, clearly visible to anyone looking up from the street. They had just begun going down when they noticed light flickering. The reflection of a blue light! Pete looked down. A second patrol car appeared in the street.

“Stop!” cried Pete. “You have to climb back, Jupe. There are cops down there!”

Jupiter had already seen the car. “But we can’t go back to the apartment, the other two will be there any minute!”

“Up on the roof!” cried Pete.

Jupiter set himself in motion. He climbed up the squeaky, shaky ladder as fast as he could, past the open window and further up. At any moment, he expected to hear excited shouts from below. But perhaps the policemen had not yet got out of the second car, but were talking to their colleagues from the first car by radio. The first car policemen could also appear at the window below them any second.

After the third floor, came the roof. Jupiter swung himself over the parapet and ran a few steps out of sight, then he dropped exhausted onto the gravel that covered the flat roof.

“Don’t slow down now,” Pete urged. “If they haven’t discovered us yet, that would be pure luck. Probably the two of them couldn’t get the door open that fast. But it’s only a matter of time before they find out that we are on the roof. And by then, we have to be gone.”

“And how?” Bob asked.

Pete looked around. “There’s the entrance to the stairwell over there.”

“We can’t escape via the staircase,” Bob objected. “That’s where they’ll grab us!”

“Well... we’ll just have to move over to the neighbouring roof,” Pete suggested, and he ran across the entire gravel area to the narrow side of the building. The neighbouring building was almost identical in construction, had the same height and stood only about two metres away.

“Two metres. We’ll make it,” Pete called back and waved his friends here excitedly.

“Never!” Jupiter said determinedly as he looked into the yawning abyss between the two buildings with eyes wide open.

“Of course we can. That’s not even two metres. Even you can do it, Jupe,” Bob said.

The First Investigator shook his head. His mouth was dry as dust. Just the thought of jumping over there made him dizzy.

“Jupe! In athletics class, even the last fool can jump three metres in the long jump.”

“Maybe the last fool, but not me!” Jupiter gasped. “Besides, I’ve always missed athletics. I’ve never done the long jump.”

“Of course you did,” Bob replied. “Come on, Jupe, we have to hurry or they’ll catch us!”

“Then let them catch us,” Jupiter decided.

“Jupe!” Pete was angry. “This whole operation has been a kamikaze operation from the start. I knew that. But no, Mr First Investigator Jupiter Jones of course had to get his stubbornness through. But now, when it comes down to it, he’s going to chicken out after all? Then we could have stayed at home!”

“You don’t understand, Pete, I can’t do this!” Jupe cried.

“Of course you can.” Pete thought of something. “Remember how you tore that police seal off the door and I had no choice but to pick the lock?”

Jupiter nodded.

“Watch this.” Pete took a few steps back, then took a run-up and jumped. Without any problem he flew over the edge and landed safely on the other side.

Bob wasn’t so fearless, but Pete was right—two metres was really no big deal. Bob jumped. And he made it just as easily.

“Okay, Jupe, now you!” Bob shouted.

“I... I...” Jupiter stammered.

“We’ll be going then,” Pete said as he turned around and made his way to the stairway entrance.

Jupiter swallowed. He looked down. It was ten metres down—at least. Then he resigned. A little more. A little more. He took a run-up and—stopped half a metre from the edge. “I can’t do this!”

“Bye, Jupe, see you later!” Pete cried.

Suddenly Jupiter heard a noise. Stomping steps. He looked around. The small corrugated iron staircase entrance trembled. Someone was coming up! In a few seconds, he would have company. It’s now or never!

The First Investigator quickly went back a distance for the run-up. He took off, ran faster and faster, timed the right moment and leaped. The flight seemed endless. His gaze was resolutely directed at the threshold on the other side.

Slam! Touchdown! He landed half a metre past the edge of the building.

Pete clapped his hands enthusiastically. “Bravo, Jupe! Didn’t I say it? It wasn’t that hard!”

“We’ll talk about my athletic prowess later,” Jupe gasped. “Let’s get out of here before anyone sees us!”

Just in time they reached the staircase. Only when the door had closed behind them did they feel safer. Still, they hurried downstairs to the street. While Bob and Jupiter hid behind a garbage can, Pete went to get his car. Alone, he was more inconspicuous and probably wouldn’t be recognized by the cops.

There was a lot of confusion at the entrance of the apartment building, but he ignored that. He jumped into his MG, turned it around, picked up Jupiter and Bob and stepped on the accelerator.

“Let’s go back to Rocky Beach!” Pete cried.

10. The Haunted House

“Oh, boy!” moaned Pete. “Oh, boy! Do you have any idea what we just did?”

“I just jumped over a ten-metre wide abyss!” Jupe exclaimed.

“That’s not what I mean,” Pete said. “We were running from the police! We removed a police seal, broke into an apartment and almost got caught. We went down the fire escape and then climbed back up, jumped on the neighbouring roof and made off as if we were serious criminals! I mean, we’re the good guys, right? What is wrong with us?”

“Are you saying that we should be caught?” Bob asked.

“No. What I’m trying to say is that it can’t go on like this. We are no longer just on the edge of legality, we are already way beyond it! It can’t go on like this!”

“Calm down, Pete. Nothing happened,” Jupiter said.

“A lot has happened. Jupe! That was close!” Pete remained indignant.

“We’ll be more careful from now on,” Jupiter reassured him.

“I don’t want us to just be more careful. I don’t want us to do anything like this anymore!” Pete insisted.

Jupiter was silent. Pete was right. They really went too far. But of course Jupiter couldn’t admit that. After all, it was he who simply tore the seal off.

It was only when they were back in Rocky Beach and heading for Headquarters that Bob ended the silence. “Was it worth it? What have you discovered, Jupe?”

“This,” Jupiter pulled a piece of paper from his pocket.

“What is this?” Bob asked.

“A letter. It was lying in the chaos in front of the desk,” Jupe said as he opened the door to Headquarters and let himself fall into a chair. “I couldn’t find the envelope, so the sender is unclear, but I guess that’s not important either.”

“What does it say?” Pete asked.

“Here.” Jupiter handed them the piece of paper. Bob and Pete bent over it curiously. The letter was handwritten in black ink. It said:

Jonathan,

Time’s almost up. A year has passed. But you know, we came to the conclusion that we should wait another six months before we cash in on the mirror. It’s just not safe enough yet. That means another half a year on the edge of the subsistence level. Then we don’t have to be afraid of being caught after all.

But there is a problem. I have heard that the old house at Sunny Mountain is to be torn down. It will take a few more weeks, but we have to move the mirror to another place, and that can only be done together. So get in touch with me soon so that we can get it done.

“I’m afraid you can’t decipher the signature,” Bob murmured after reading everything. Pete was still busy with the contents of the letter. “That’s something.”

“And it’s the proof that it was indeed Jonathan King who stole the mirror,” Jupiter added. “But obviously he had an accomplice. Perhaps someone who could quickly and unobtrusively cash in on the mirror. Jonathan steals it, his partner sells it, and the profit is divided between the two. The original plan was for this to happen after one year. Remember that?”

“According to Tricia Wilson, the break-in happened almost a year ago. But Jonathan’s accomplice is afraid of the police and therefore postpones the sale of the mirror. And what does Jonathan do?”

“He’s going crazy,” Bob added. “He’s crazy because he needs money. He’s probably been living on his savings for a year... or even sold all his stuff, which could be why his place looks so empty. When he finds out he’s gonna have to wait another six months for his money, he goes crazy and robs a bank.”

“Exactly,” Jupiter agreed. “That was also my theory.”

“And I bet I know who his accomplice is,” Pete said triumphantly.

“Namely who?” Jupe asked.

“Jeremiah!” Pete cried.

“Wrong!” Jupe barked.

“Why wrong?” Pete wondered.

“Because Jeremiah could not have sent him this letter, after all, he did not know his address. And it would make no sense if he lied to us about that. After all, he wanted us to find Jonathan.”

Pete pulled a face. “Well, that’s right.”

“Besides, I can’t make out the signature, but it’s definitely not Jeremiah. The name is much shorter,” Jupiter continued.

“All right, all right, so I was wrong again,” Pete admitted. “For that I can jump over abysses.”

“But who the accomplice is, is of secondary importance for the time being,” Jupiter relented. “More important is that we know where they hid the mirror.”

“In a house on Sunny Mountain that’s about to be torn down!” Bob remarked.

“Sunny Mountain?” Pete repeated. “That’s just north of Rocky Beach! And wait a minute, I think I even know which house we’re talking about!”

“Excuse me?” Bob wondered.

“Yes! Sunny Mountain is already half of the National Park. There’s not many houses there,” Pete said.

“There are a few, though,” Bob added.

“But only one to be torn down,” Pete said with confidence.

“And how do you know which one this is?” Bob wondered.

“Because my parents were talking about it recently. You know my mum’s been going on about how our house was too small and she wants to move. Whenever she sees an empty house, she walks around it a hundred times, imagines what she wants to do with the garden and calls the owner. He tells her the price and that’s it. Then it’s on to the next house. Well, and the other day she raved about a house she discovered while walking with my father on Sunny Mountain. She described it to me exactly where it was. But then she found out that it’s falling apart and it’s about to be demolished. That must be it!”

Jupiter jumped up. “Then let’s go!”

“What?” cried Pete. “You want to go there now?”

“Why not?” Jupe cried.

“Because it’s almost midnight,” Pete objected. “I have to go home! And go to school tomorrow!”

"It's only ten minutes to Sunny Mountain," Jupe countered. "We'll go there, get the mirror and get out of there."

"Every time even if a Jupiter Jones plan sounds very simple, it ends with great difficulties," Pete proclaimed. "And I've had enough of that today, thank you very much."

"Come on, Pete," Bob said. "Your parents are asleep anyway, just like mine. They won't even notice if you are a little late home. And you'll be fine in school."

"Besides, every minute can be important," Jupiter added. "Who knows if it's not too late and the mirror has been moved to another hiding place."

"As if it depended on this one night," Pete doubted.

"You never know. So, let's go!" Jupiter urged.

Despite its friendly name, Sunny Mountain was an eerie place, at least at night. The Three Investigators were in Pete's MG. The road to the house was hardly more than a forest path. There were no street lamps and the surrounding trees swallowed almost all the starlight. The only illumination came from the car's headlights.

"Good thing the house is being torn down," he said. "Imagine if we had really moved to that lonely place, I wouldn't have dared to go out at night."

Suddenly the trees receded and the path widened into a clearing. The house was right in front of them. It was all wood and not as big as Pete had imagined. It would have been very idyllic by day, but in the dark it rose before them like an eerie haunted castle. The clearing was deserted. No car, no bicycle and it didn't look as if anyone had lived here in the last few months.

"We seem to be undisturbed," Jupiter said contentedly. "That's good."

Pete drove a bit further past a bend in the road and parked by the side next to the undergrowth. In this way, it was not obvious that they were visiting that house.

Then they walked towards the house. The front was surrounded by a verandah. Jupiter went up the three steps and tried the door.

"Locked." He shook it again—and suddenly the door swung open. "Oops!"

"Oh, oh," Bob did. "The spirits grant you entrance, Jupe."

"Cut the stupid jokes, Bob," Pete whispered. "Just the word 'ghosts' gives me the creeps here, anyway."

"The door is just completely warped, so it gave way immediately," explained Jupiter. "That's all. Come now!"

They entered the pitch dark house and turned on their flashlights. The first room was completely empty. Dust and a few leaves lay in front of a broken window, that was all. The floorboards creaked under every step they took. There were two more doors.

"Now where do we look for the mirror?" Bob asked.

"In the basement," Jupiter replied promptly.

"Why the basement?" Pete asked.

"Because up here, there are very few places to hide anything," Jupiter reasoned. "Except maybe behind the walls or under the floor. But if the house is dilapidated, it would be too risky for such a valuable mirror. Besides, we're certainly not the first ones to look around here. An old empty house like this is very inviting to anyone who goes for a walk."

"You think so? Not everyone is as crazy about scary places as you are," Pete remarked.

"Nevertheless, the risk of someone else accidentally discovering the mirror would be far too great. I would hide it in the basement," Jupiter continued.

It didn't take them long to find the basement stairs. Unlike the rest of the house, the foundation was concrete. The floor was dirty and dusty. Pete thought he saw some spiders scurrying away in the flashlight. And something bigger. A rat? The Second Investigator decided not to look closer. It was spooky enough down here.

The individual basement rooms were separated from each other by roughly knocked together wooden doors, but all without a lock. It did not take long before they had searched all of them. The basement was completely empty, as was the rest of the house. But there was another door. It was made of steel and had a huge padlock.

"Looks like the boiler room," said Jupiter. "Can you open the door, Pete?"

The Second Investigator took a closer look at the lock. He took out his tools from his pocket and tried to pick it. But after a short while, he shook his head.

"This is a Carver & Carver," Pete said.

"A what?" Jupiter asked.

"A Carver & Carver special lock," Pete explained. "These things cost fifty dollars and are pretty burglar-proof."

"Pretty much or totally?" Jupiter probed.

"Well, if I had a lot of tools and a lot of time, I might be able to get it open, by force if necessary, but certainly not with my puny pokers here."

Jupiter let his shoulders sink in disappointment. "What a bummer."

"I guess we'll just have to come back tomorrow," Bob said. "And be better equipped."

"That's how I see it, too," Pete agreed.

The First Investigator sighed. "All right. I don't like it, but I don't think we have a choice... But we should at least see the rest of the house. Maybe we can find something interesting."

Pete was relieved when they returned upstairs. Once more quickly through the house and then off to bed! He would be much more comfortable with daylight tomorrow.

They combed the ground floor with no result, then they carefully climbed the creaking stairs up to the upper hallway. Pete opened the nearest door, shone through the room behind it—and was startled!

If he had been convinced that they were the only visitors here, then he had been mistaken!

11. The Thing About Time

A man was lying on a plastic mat on the floor. He had rolled himself into a sleeping bag and lay with his back to the door. Luckily, because Pete would probably have shone a light right into his face and he would have woken up. Quickly the Second Investigator switched off his flashlight. He was about to back off quietly when the sleeping man grunted and turned around. Pete left the room in a hurry.

“There’s someone lying there,” he hissed to his friends.

“What do you mean—there’s someone lying there?” Bob asked.

“There’s a guy sleeping! I think he just woke up. Come on, let’s get out of here!” Pete didn’t wait for an answer, but rushed down the stairs and out the door. Bob and Jupiter also left the house, but Pete did not stop running towards the road.

“Pete!” whispered Jupiter. “Wait a minute!”

“I’m outta here!” Pete cried.

Jupiter and Bob caught up with the Second Investigator only fifty metres away from the house.

“Now don’t panic, Pete,” Jupiter reassured him.

“Someone was lying there!” Pete repeated.

“So what? It was probably just a hobo who lay down there to sleep.” Jupe said.

“A hobo in a brand-new sleeping bag with a fancy leather travel bag beside him? I don’t think so.” Pete asserted.

“What are you saying?” Jupe asked.

“Yes, Jupe, the guy was well-equipped. He was no hobo, for sure.”

“Did you see his face?”

“No. Fortunately not, because otherwise he would have seen mine, too. I think I woke him up. Why do you think I left so quickly?”

“Pete, you’re an idiot,” Jupiter said.

“What’s your point?” Pete asked.

“Has it occurred to you that that might be Jonathan King?”

The Second Investigator made a full stop. “What?”

“That would make sense, wouldn’t it? King robs a bank and has to get out of his apartment so the police don’t catch him. Where’s he hiding? Of course, where the stolen goods from the burglary of one year ago are hidden—in a house on Sunny Mountain, which is also conveniently located in the middle of the forest, so that only a few walkers can get lost here.”

“If you’re right,” Bob said, “then it was right to leave. When he robbed the bank, King had a gun. If I were him, I’d keep it handy next to my sleeping bag at all times when I’m up there hiding.”

“Jupe,” Pete said quickly. “And I wouldn’t want to mess with an armed bank robber.” He started moving again. Soon they got back into Pete’s MG. He started the car and left the forest road. Before long, they found themselves back on a normal road on the outskirts of Rocky Beach.

“What do we do now?” Bob asked. “Do we call the police?”

Jupiter shook his head. "It's still too soon for that."

"Too soon? I think it's exactly the right time," Bob said. "We got the bank robber and the stolen goods, what more do we want?"

"Wrong. I just assumed that was Jonathan King. And we don't know for sure that behind the steel door is the stolen mirror. If we alert Cotta now and it was just a tramp after all and behind the door is nothing but the boiler room, then we will embarrass ourselves to the bone. Besides, we haven't solved the mystery of Jonathan King's accomplice yet. Until we find out who is behind the mysterious letter writer, we will not notify the police."

Pete sighed. "In plain language, you want to wait until the whole place is on fire before you acknowledge that we are in deep trouble."

The next school day was an ordeal even for Jupiter, who otherwise had no problems. He had hardly slept the previous night. Again and again, he had gone over the case in his head and tried to consolidate the many different pieces of information. He had come to the conclusion that there were still a few missing pieces of the puzzle to put the picture together. By then, it was already 3 am. The next morning, he was totally washed out.

Now he was sitting alone in Headquarters waiting for Bob and Pete. Pete had some kind of sports training again. Bob still had to do some errands, so he sat alone in their trailer and pondered.

This case really gave him a headache. But he hoped that everything would clear up once they had secured the mirror and found out who the mysterious overnight guest in the house on Sunny Mountain had been. Jupiter already had a plan. But he needed the help of his fellow detectives.

Without really knowing why, he put Tricia Wilson's video cassette into the recorder and watched the recording one more time. Maybe that helped his brain to remember. Over and over again, he ran the recording. But he didn't know what other detail to look for. He'd seen it all before, over and over again. Maybe he was mistaken. Maybe there wasn't any hidden clues in the recording.

Meanwhile, he wondered what happened to Pete and Bob. The First Investigator looked at his watch. A quarter past five. You know, they really ought to be getting...

The watch!

Jupiter froze. The watch!

Quickly he rewound the video cassette and pressed play. At the right point, he switched to a still image and moved very close to the TV.

Indeed! That is remarkable! Why hadn't he seen it earlier?

A few moments later, Bob and Pete barged into Headquarters.

"You're sitting in front of the video again?" Bob asked tiredly. "Aren't you sick of it yet?"

"No way!" Jupiter remarked.

"You've got some nerve," Bob quipped.

"No. I have just solved the mystery," Jupe announced.

"What?" Both Bob and Pete cried at the same time.

"Yes! It was right in front of us the whole time! We just didn't see it!"

Pete raised his hands defensively. "Wait a minute! What lies in front of us the whole time?"

"The answer to our questions! Here! Look at this!"

Jupiter started the video recording. Bob and Pete looked at the monitor in boredom.

“So?” Jupiter asked excitedly. “Did you notice anything?”

“Jupiter Jones,” Pete said annoyed. “We’ve watched the recording a thousand times and didn’t notice anything. What makes you think it will be any different now?”

“The watch!”

“What watch?”

“Jonathan King’s watch! You can see it clearly when he shines his flashlight across the room in the second scene. There!”

“Yes,” Bob agreed. “So?”

“Now watch the rest of the cassette!” Jupiter waited a few seconds, then stopped the recording at the point where the burglar wrapped the mirror. “So? What do you see?”

“Jonathan King, who is currently wrapping a mirror in a blanket,” Pete said.

“Geez, Pete, look at the watch!”

“What watch?” Pete asked.

“Exactly,” Jupe cried.

“You’re right, Jupe,” Bob said. “You can see his left forearm very clearly, but the watch is not there.”

Pete did not understand. “So what? So he took it off.”

“You don’t really believe that yourself, do you?” Jupe asked. “Why would a burglar who just stole a million and a half dollar mirror suddenly take off his watch?”

“I don’t know,” Pete said.

“But I know,” Jupiter announced. “He did not take it off.”

“Then what?” Pete probed further.

“This man is not the same as that in the earlier scene,” Jupiter announced.

“You... you mean...” Bob gasped.

“Exactly!” Jupe exclaimed. “I mean that two men were involved in the break-in. Two men who look exactly alike and by some stupid coincidence are never together in the picture. Jonathan and Jeremiah King, the twin brothers!”

“Who are never in the picture together?” Bob wondered. “How was that supposed to happen?”

“Remember? Tricia Wilson told us that the burglar broke in through the window, but there’s no footage of it. So let’s assume that there were two burglars. They came in through the window and then they went around the house looking for the mirror. Remember Miss Wilson’s house was full of doors? You could get from any room into any room. So if they took different routes, it’s quite possible that only one of them was caught by the cameras at a time. On the way back, one disappeared through the front door, the other through the window again.”

“And why?” Pete asked.

“Because one was busy downstairs carrying the mirror away while the other was upstairs taking care of the alarm system. And he just ran out the window instead of wandering around the house again. The police were surprised at that time at how quickly the whole theft took place. Almost too fast, at least for one person. But for two people sharing the task, it probably wasn’t that difficult.”

“That might be true, Jupe,” Bob said thoughtfully. “So that would mean that it was Jeremiah who helped his brother after all. But how does that fit in with the rest of the story? Jeremiah must have known Jonathan’s address, after all, he wrote him the letter. But... didn’t you say that the signature could mean anything but ‘Jeremiah’?”

“The signature can be a nickname,” pondered Jupiter. “And also, we don’t have the envelope that came with the letter. Maybe it was addressed to a post office box. Then

Jonathan would have received it without his brother necessarily knowing his address. Everything fits together! The two have stolen the mirror and now Jonathan is on the verge of going to jail. But the letter says that they can only get the mirror out of its hiding place together. Jeremiah must find his brother before the police do, so that they could retrieve the mirror together. He can't possibly wait until Jonathan is released from prison. After all, the house is about to be demolished!"

Pete frowned. "I just don't understand how this is going to work. How or where is the mirror supposed to be so that it takes two people to get it out of its hiding place? And why can't Jeremiah just get someone else? Why does it have to be his brother?"

"I don't know yet either. But we'll find out. Come on, fellas, we gotta get to Sunny Mountain."

"What about Jonathan King?" Bob interjected. "If he's really up there hiding from the police, I guarantee he's still there. How are we gonna get past him?"

"I already have a plan. One of us has to lure him out of the house while the other gets the mirror. The third should stay here at Headquarters for emergencies, where we can contact him on our mobile phone if anything goes wrong."

"I'll do that," Pete said quickly. "I'm perfect for emergencies."

"Can't," Bob objected. "You have to go to Sunny Mountain."

Pete got scared. "Why is that?"

"Because you're the only one who can pick the lock on that steel door."

"Not necessarily," said Jupiter. "Because I found a first-class tool in Uncle Titus's storeroom. Perfectly suited for our purposes."

"Yeah? And what's that?" Pete asked.

"This!" Jupiter bent down and pulled out a monstrous bolt cutter from under the desk. A giant pair of pliers with handles almost a metre long. The razor-sharp blades flashed dangerously.

Bob whistled through his teeth. "My goodness! You could easily cut a truck in half with these cutters!"

"And a Carver & Carver too," Jupiter triumphed. "This is a bolt cutter straight from hell!"

12. The Two Kings

Bob drove Jupiter in his Beetle to Sunny Mountain. The Three Investigators had agreed that Pete would stay at Headquarters and keep a watch on the phone. Jupiter had his mobile phone with him. If anything should go wrong, they still had the Second Investigator as an ace up their sleeve. However, they had not yet agreed on who would start the diversion and who would take care of the mirror. Bob avoided bringing it up. He was afraid Jupiter might respond.

When Bob passed the junction to the house, they saw that there was a car parked nearby, but that wasn't unusual on such a beautiful day. It was probably a pedestrian going for walks in that area.

"You better park at the same place as Pete did last night," Jupiter decided. "Then we can sneak up on the house by foot."

"All right." Bob agreed.

Jupiter shouldered his backpack, from which the handles of the gigantic bolt cutter protruded, and they set off up the mountain. The sun's rays, which penetrated the canopy of leaves, painted glittering patterns of light and shadow on the forest floor.

By day, Sunny Mountain wasn't scary at all. When Bob and Jupiter reached the foot of the mountain, the sun was shining from the sky and turned the path that had looked so scary last night into an inviting walk. But when Bob looked at his watch, he realized that the sun would set in an hour. Then the idyll was over. Bob hoped they had accomplished their mission by then.

"So, Jupe, how do we lure this guy out of hiding? What's the plan?" Bob asked.

"I thought you'd sneak into the house as conspicuously as possible so he'd notice you, and then when he starts to come after you, you run away."

Bob swallowed. "I was afraid you were gonna say something like that. Have you forgotten that Jonathan King knows me? I was the only witness to the bank robbery that saw his face. I'm sure he can remember that."

"All the better. He'll be scared and have all the more reason to go after you."

"Go after me?" Bob gulped.

"Of course. After all, we want him out of the house as long as possible."

"What if he catches me?" Bob asked.

"He won't. You're supposed to be..." Jupiter stopped.

"What?"

"Shh! Someone's coming!" Jupiter whispered.

The forest road made a bend twenty metres before them. Through the trees a figure could be seen coming towards them. He was still far away.

"I don't think he's seen us yet! Quick, hide!" Jupiter ran into the forest, jumped through the undergrowth and ducked behind a big fallen tree trunk.

A second later, Bob was beside him. "Do you think that's him?" he whispered.

"We'll see soon," Jupiter whispered back.

The figure came closer. It was a man dressed in dark clothes. He moved carefully, as if he were afraid of something. Could he have noticed them? But the man never looked in their

direction once. When he passed the fallen tree, they could see his face. Dark curls, piercing light eyes.

“It is him,” Bob whispered as Jonathan King was out of earshot.

“Perfect,” whispered Jupiter. “We can save ourselves the diversionary tactics. Bob, you follow him! I’ll take care of the mirror in the meantime.”

“Why should I follow him?”

“Because I want to know where he’s going. And if he comes back, you can warn me. You know, our secret bird call!” By that, he meant the call of the Red-bellied Flycatcher, which all three of them mastered perfectly.

“But you won’t be able to hear that in the basement,” Bob wondered.

“Well, you’ll think of something. Come on, before he’s gone!”

Bob climbed out from behind the tree trunk and tried to get back onto the forest path as quietly as possible. When he got to the path, King had already disappeared around the next bend. Bob waved at Jupiter once more, then hurried to follow the man. It wasn’t long before he appeared in front of him again. Bob always kept just as much distance so that he could keep a close eye on him but could hide behind a tree at any time should King turn around.

After two minutes, the bank robber reached the road. Bob was excited. Would he go on foot? He headed straight for the parked car, took out a key and got in. What next? Bob waited for the car to start, then ran as fast as he could past the bend to his Beetle. He started the car and made a U-turn.

King’s car was already at the end of the road. Bob had to accelerate to close up on him. Then King turned into the main road. Bob was trying to catch up, and if the traffic light was on his side, he might not lose sight of him. At the next intersection, King put the indicator on and turned left towards Rocky Beach. Bob raced after him. This was one of the main thoroughfares of the town with lots of traffic lights. Good. Bob managed to see King cross the next intersection. But then the red light came up and Bob had to stop.

When Bob finally crossed the intersection thirty seconds later, King was gone. Don’t panic! He’d find him again! There were not many cars on the road, so Bob drove on slowly, looking into every side street. But he couldn’t see King’s car. After a few minutes of unsuccessful search, he gave up.

“Damn!” he said softly to himself, stopped and took a breather. Now what? Bob decided to return to Jupiter.

Wherever King was, he was in any case far enough away from Sunny Mountain so that Jupiter could sneak through the house without danger.

Bob reached the forest path, park at the same place next to the undergrowth again and made his way to the house. But when the clearing appeared in front of him and the wooden house slowly appeared behind the trees, Bob saw something that made him pull together. He hid behind a tree and peeked out carefully behind it.

A tall man with dark curls approached the building, went up the stairs and stepped through the porch door. Bob had only seen him for a few seconds, but that was enough. He didn’t know who he was, but there was no doubt about one thing—he was one of the Kings!

When Jupiter entered the house, he stood very quietly for a few seconds and listened. He wanted to be sure that this time he was really alone here. Except for the chirping of the birds, which penetrated through the broken window, no sound could be heard.

The First Investigator thought about going upstairs and looking through Jonathan King’s things again, but then he decided against it. He didn’t know how much time he had until King

returned, so the basement took priority. Jupiter went to the basement entrance, turned on the flashlight and descended the stairs.

The basement was cold and dark. Jupiter shivered, of course only from the cold. He then quickly reassured himself in his thoughts. Soon he stood in front of the steel door. He unloaded his backpack, put the flashlight on the floor and took out his tools.

“Let’s see what the bolt cutter from hell is made of!” The staple was thick, so he decided attack the padlock’s shackle. He clamped the bolt cutter on the shackle, grabbed both ends and squeezed. Secretly, he hoped the hardened steel blades would cut through the shackle like butter. But nothing moved. Perhaps it would have been better for two people to do the job. Pete was much stronger than he was.

Jupiter squeezed again, this time with all his strength. Without success. He put the bolt cutter aside and looked at the padlock. A small notch had appeared in the metal after all. But a notch was by no means a broken lock.

“That’s not the way to do it,” Jupiter muttered and decided to try another tactic. He positioned the bolt cutter so that he could press one of the two handles against the door. Then he grasped the other firmly with both hands and braced himself against it. For a moment, it looked as if that wouldn’t work either, but then there was an ugly crack and he was through!

Jupiter moaned. He released the bolt cutter from the lock and looked at his work. He turned the shackle around and the padlock fell to the ground.

Relieved, Jupiter stowed away his bolt cutter, picked up the flashlight and opened the door. The basement room was small and was dominated by a human-sized electrical system made of orange painted metal. Pipes protruded from it and led into the wall. On the front side, there were small windows through which one could see various dials. They were all at zero.

It was a heating system and it was switched off. A heating system, nothing more—at least from first sight. But Jupiter knew that something was hidden here somewhere. He certainly wouldn’t be wrong. The mirror was here, he could almost smell it. Getting down on his knees, he shone his flashlight under the radiator, but there was nothing there. The walls were smooth concrete and it didn’t look as if anyone had tampered with them.

Finally, he took a closer look at the heating system itself. The cover on the front looked untouched, but when Jupiter took a closer look, he discovered scratch marks on the sides—especially around the screws that fixed the panel to the unit. The First Investigator pulled out his pocket knife, unfolded the screwdriver and unscrewed the screws, one by one. Five minutes later, he was able to remove the orange plate. Behind it was not just the tangle of pipes and valves he had expected.

The heater had only been a clever hiding place for something completely different. It was a safe. At least it looked like a safe. A dark steel cabinet, one metre high. The door seemed absolutely indestructible. And it is possible that the safe contained a million-dollar mirror made of solid gold,

Jupiter shone in for a closer look. Then, a realization struck him like lightning! He saw something that made him finally understand the full extent of this confusion. But he could no longer bring himself to think about his discovery.

Suddenly he heard a noise. Footsteps! Someone was coming down the stairs! In a matter of seconds, Jupiter checked his possibilities. Could he still make it out of the room without being discovered? No, it was too late! Even though it was only a few metres to the basement stairs, there is no way he could escape unseen.

He turned off the flashlight, closed the steel door and pressed himself against the wall. Damn! If Bob had warned him, he hadn’t actually heard it! His heart was pounding loudly as he waited. The footsteps came closer, closer and closer.

The footsteps stopped right outside the door. Silence. Whoever was out there had just discovered that the lock was broken. The door swung open. A flashlight shone across the room. Then someone came in, looked around the corner—and shone a light straight into Jupiter's face.

13. Confusion

Bob was paralyzed. What could he do now? Jupiter was down there in the basement! Maybe King didn't go downstairs, but Jupiter didn't know that he was no longer alone in the house! Would he sneak out unnoticed if he had the mirror? Should Bob just wait? Desperately, Bob pursed his lips and mimicked the call of the Red-bellied Flycatcher. It was hopeless. He was too far away.

He waited and expected Jupiter to rush out of the door at any moment... or that King would drag him out... or that a shot was fired. Which of the two King's was it, anyway? And which one had he just tried to follow by car? Or would that even matter any more? Were they both equally dangerous in this situation?

He had to lure King out of the house somehow, and in such a way that he could warn Jupiter at the same time. And he had to hurry. He could only think of one way. Bob took a deep breath, then he left his guard and walked towards the house.

Pete drummed nervously with his fingers on the desk and stared into space. Actually he had wanted to pass the time with a computer game, but now the colourful question marks of the screensaver moved across the monitor and Pete didn't want to click them away.

It was only half an hour ago that Bob and Jupiter had left. Even if everything had gone smoothly, they couldn't even be back so soon. So what was he worried about? But Pete couldn't help it. He couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong.

Suddenly, through the window of Headquarters, Pete saw a shadow scurrying past. He hoped that it wasn't Aunt Mathilda checking things out at the salvage yard. Then there was a knock.

Pete got up and opened the door. "Mr King!" Pete bit his lips. It was much too loud. But Jeremiah King was not whom he expected.

"Hello," King said uncertainly. "May I come in?"

"Uh... yes, of course." Pete took a step back and let King into Headquarters. Meanwhile, his mind was spinning.

It was Jeremiah King! What was he doing here? Pete wondered what should he do now. Let him know what they found out? Or should he even say anything at all? No, it was best if he asked the questions and let King talk, rather than the other way around.

"Where are the rest?" asked Mr King.

Too late. "They are... out. Running some errands. Yeah, right. They'll be right back. I mean... I hope so. I mean, I'm not sure if they're coming right back or not. So, like, an hour or so. Or two. So if you want to talk to Jupiter, you'd better come back. Maybe tomorrow, and he'll be here then." What was he talking about?

Suddenly, Pete asked: "How... How did it go with the police?"

"Oh. All right."

"So they believed you, then, that you were innocent?"

"Yeah. I'm fine."

"And your brother? Have the police picked up his trail yet?"

“I’m not sure. Anyway, they’re still looking for him. And that’s actually why I’m here.” Jeremiah King cleared his throat. “Listen, I think it’s better if you just give it up.”

“Give up? What do you mean?” Pete sensed what he meant, but King should reveal more. As long as King was talking, Pete need not say much.

“It was a mistake to give you this case. I think the police are doing their job quite well. Besides, you’re only putting yourselves in danger unnecessarily. It’s not worth it.”

“That’s all right.”

“No, it’s not. If something should happen to you just because I asked you to find my brother, I would never forgive myself. Or have you already found something out?”

“Well,” Pete hesitantly began. “Not really. No, not really.”

King looked at him piercingly. “You sure?”

“Yes.”

The Second Investigator remembered what Jupiter had said yesterday as to what information they could pass on to King with confidence and what they had better not.

“Well, we found out your brother’s address from the hotel, but by the time we got to his apartment, the police were already there. But it’s better that Jupiter tell you that.” Pete smiled sheepishly. “I... I’m not so good at reporting what happened. Didn’t the police stop your brother at the apartment?”

“No. He escaped. But he knows now that he is being followed, and therefore he is extremely dangerous. Do you understand me? He’s armed! So you can’t spend another second on this case, all right? Whatever you’ve found out, whatever you’re about to find out is none of your business. You understand?” Jeremiah King had got very close to Pete and fixed him with his uncomfortably piercing eyes.

“Sure.”

“Promise me you’ll tell your friends about this and get them to back off.”

“Yeah. Sure. I was against this from the start,” Pete said. “It’s too dangerous. You’re right.”

King stared at him for a moment, then nodded slightly. “Good. I thank you for your support, but that’s all over now. I’m leaving it to the police. You’ll hear about it on the news. I’ll get back to you.”

Pete was about to say something back when the phone rang. He breathed again. Whoever it was saved him from that terrible situation.

“If that’s Jupiter, then please let me speak to him,” said King. “I’d like to tell him in person.”

Pete nodded and reached for the receiver. “The Three Investigators. Pete Crenshaw speaking.”

“Hello, Pete. This is Jeremiah King.”

14. Pete Defies Instructions

For seconds, Pete didn't say a word. He was literally speechless. Jeremiah King? But then... who was the man sitting right in front of him?

"Oh, hello," he finally said.

"Is Jupiter in?"

"Uh... uh... no, he's not here right now." Pete looked over at... to the other King, who was sitting there looking at him. He quickly put his hand on the shell and whispered: "It's not Jupiter!" He hoped that King would just leave, but he didn't budge.

"Well, never mind, I just wanted to ask if you've made any progress. The police questioned me all day yesterday. Fortunately they believed me and let me go home. But I guess they're on to my brother now. If I'm still trying to help him get out of this, it would be good if you could find him soon. How's it going?"

Good gracious! How should Pete answer to that? What was he supposed to say, so that he wouldn't betray himself to one King or the other?

"All right. But perhaps you should talk to Jupiter about it. He knows more about the matter."

"Oh, yeah? When is he coming back?"

"Probably sometime in the next few hours. I'm not sure."

"All right, I'll call back later."

"Best not until tomorrow morning," Pete said quickly. He really didn't need another phone call like that today. "Tomorrow's Saturday. He'll definitely be here."

"In the morning, all right. I hope Jupiter has good news for me. I urgently need to speak to my brother!"

"We'll find him. So long!" Pete hung up and turned around. King was staring at him. And the suspicion in his eyes was certainly not imaginary.

"Who was that?"

"A client. We got two cases, you know? It's about a lost... cat."

"A cat?"

"Yes."

"Well, then you can now focus on just that case, right?"

"Certainly, sir."

"I'm gonna go now."

"Yes. Have a nice day."

"You too." King turned around and left Headquarters.

For seconds, Pete stood frozen, then he let himself fall into the armchair and closed his eyes exhausted. His head was spinning. Jonathan King... Jeremiah King... who had been who? And why did Jonathan know about them?

Suddenly something occurred to him. The sneeze. His visitor hadn't sneezed. But wasn't Jeremiah allergic to the chemicals in the photo lab? So that had to be Jonathan, the bank robber. Clearly he was trying to get them off the case. But this proved that he knew about The Three Investigators and their investigation.

What should Pete do now? Contact Jupe! Although it had been agreed that Pete would not call him on the mobile phone so as not to put him in danger by ringing at the wrong moment, but if he saw things correctly, there was no danger. Jonathan had just been here and Jeremiah had been on the phone with him just a few minutes ago, which meant that he was most likely not at Sunny Mountain. So Bob and Jupe were undisturbed up there. And he just had to tell Jupiter about his creepy visitor! He would know what to do. Pete reached for the phone and dialled Jupe's mobile phone number.

The light dazzled Jupiter. He could not see the stranger. But when the man spoke, Jupe recognized him immediately by his voice: "Who are you? How did you get in here? What are you doing here?"

It was King—not Jeremiah, because he would have recognized him immediately, but Jonathan! Even their voices were identical.

"Speak up!"

All right. Now Jupiter had to lay his cards on the table. He plucked up all his courage and said, "I'm here to recover the mirror you and your brother stole from Tricia Wilson's house a year ago, Mr King."

"What?"

"I know who you are. And I also know you robbed that bank in Rocky Beach a few days ago. The game is up."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Jupiter Jones. I have been tracking you on behalf of your brother Jeremiah these past few days."

Jupiter could not see his face, but Jonathan King gasped for breath and his voice trembled in horror when he said: "What... what are you talking about?"

"It's the truth, Mr King."

"How did you get in here?"

"That was not difficult at all," replied Jupiter evasively.

The man shone his flashlight through the basement room and discovered the bolt cutter. Now that the flashlight was no longer shining in Jupiter's face, he could see the man properly for the first time. He really looked like his brother right down to his hair. He had shaved off the beard he had during the robbery, and he was practically indistinguishable from Jeremiah. But Jupiter saw something else—the gun in King's hand that was aimed at him.

"Aha," Jonathan said as he picked up the cutter and the backpack. "I guess you won't be needing this anymore."

Then he looked at him indecisively. "I don't know who you are or what kind of game is being played here, but I'll find out. You stay here for now. And that one—" he pointed to the safe, "you don't touch that, understand?"

King looked around and took Jupiter's backpack, too. Then he ripped the flashlight from Jupe's hand. For a moment, the First Investigator feared he would search him—and discover the mobile phone in his pocket. But King did not think that far ahead. He shone his light across the room once more, went out and shut the door. Jupiter is left alone in total darkness. There was a scraping sound, then a click. King had put a new lock on the door.

At that moment, Jupe's mobile phone rang.

"Come on, Jupe!" Pete muttered when no one answer his call. "Have you got your mobile phone on silent mode?" He waited a few more times, then hung up. "Great. And now what?"

He had to do something. How long had Bob and Jupiter been gone? Three quarters of an hour.

If that really was Jonathan King, then they probably hadn't met him up there at all. But now he was probably on his way back to Sunny Mountain. And his friends had no idea about that!

"Take it easy, Pete," the Second Investigator said to himself. "Jupe told you to stay here, so you stay here." But he couldn't just wait, knowing that in the house on the mountain, an encounter would soon take place that would put Bob and Jupe in great danger!

He wrestled with himself. On the one hand, Jupiter had instructed him to stay there. On the other hand, Pete now knew something that Jupiter did not. Pete had to make a decision. If things went wrong, Jupiter would probably kill him, but there was nothing he could do about that.

Again he picked up the phone and dialled.

"Rocky Beach Police Department, Inspector Keaton."

"Oh, uh, good afternoon. This is Pete Crenshaw. I'd like to speak to Inspector Cotta."

"He's not in the office yet. He's working the night shift. Can I take a message?"

"When is he coming in?"

"In two hours."

Pete pondered for a moment. "Please tell him to call Jupiter Jones."

"Oh, he'll be so pleased," the inspector replied sarcastically.

"Tell him it's urgent and to call as soon as he gets in."

"I will."

"Thank you." Pete hung up.

He leaned over to the answering machine thought about what he could do.

15. The Last Key

A few minutes later, Pete reached for his jacket and left Headquarters. His MG was parked outside the gates of the salvage yard. He got into it and drove away. Almost simultaneously, he noticed a car behind him. It was a red Chevrolet following him. Not necessarily unusual, but in his detective career, Pete had learned to be suspicious in such cases. He drove extra slowly to see if the Chevrolet was actually pursuing him. Pete's suspicions were confirmed faster than he wanted to.

The driver of the car tried to stay a distance behind him so that Pete would not be suspicious, but the Second Investigator did not miss anything. He deliberately took a few detours until he was quite sure that he was being followed.

"All right, baby," he muttered. "I'm gonna lose you." He took the next right. As soon as the Chevrolet was out of sight, he raced down the street, turned right, and then immediately left. He'd landed in an industrial park. Not exactly the cosiest of neighbourhoods, but it's the perfect place to hide. Pete parked at the yard of a freight forwarding company next to a stationary truck.

It was early Friday evening and there was nobody in the company. Here he would wait a few minutes before continuing his journey. He didn't believe that the red Chevrolet would still be following him.

Who was that? Was it Jonathan King? It was a hunch, although Pete was not clear why. Did that mean that Jupiter and Bob would not have been in danger if Pete had not left the salvage yard? He hated these mind games. His head was already confused. He hadn't understood anything about this case for a long time anyway. It was for Jupiter to solve it to finally have peace again.

Suddenly he heard a car behind him. Pete turned and peered carefully. It was the red Chevrolet! It came up and stopped directly behind Pete's car, blocking him from driving away.

The driver got out. It was Jonathan King! And he carried a gun.

"What?" Pete gasped and did a quick check to ensure that his car was locked and all windows were wound up.

Jonathan came up to the driver's side and yelled: "You must think I'm completely stupid! You think I didn't notice you were on the phone with my brother?"

"I—"

"Come on, boy. It's time to finish this game. Get out of the car or you'll regret it..."

The mobile phone rang. Jupiter forgot to put it on silent mode. "Damn!" Jupiter hissed, ripped it out of his pocket and switched it off after the second ringing. Too late.

There was another scraping sound, then the door was opened again and Jonathan King stood grimly before him.

"What was that?"

"What was what?"

"The beeping."

"I didn't hear anything."

“Don’t mess with me! That was a mobile phone!” He grabbed Jupiter roughly by the arm and turned him around. Then he found the phone in his pocket and took it from him. “Do you have any other surprises for me?”

Without waiting for an answer, he scanned Jupiter from top to bottom without finding anything. He pushed Jupiter into the other corner of the room, left the basement and locked the door. His footsteps receded.

Jupiter let himself slide down the wall to the floor. Now he had lost his last trump card. Which idiot had called him? Actually, that was only one—Pete. He had specifically instructed him to simply wait at the Headquarters and not to contact him on the mobile phone.

What next? Jupiter couldn’t do much, especially in the dark. All he could do was wait. After all, Bob was still out there. Jonathan must have turned back for some reason. Since Bob had followed him, he probably knew that Jupiter was trapped down here.

He hoped he was doing the right thing. Suddenly he heard something from upstairs. Someone banging on a door. Then a dark voice shouted: “Open up! Police! Come out now!”

Police? No, it wasn’t the police. He knew that voice. It was Bob!

Then there was a scream, followed by muffled noises, like from a fight.

What happened up there? Jupiter got up and pressed his ear against the door. It was quiet. Fearfully, he waited.

Then he heard footsteps! Someone came down the stairs. At least two people.

Jupiter did not have a good premonition.

The door was opened and a figure stumbled in.

It was Bob!

“Jupe!”

“Is this guy with you?” King yelled.

“I... uh... yes,” replied Jupiter.

“How many of you are here? What do you know?”

Jupiter did not answer. King looked from one to the other for a moment, snorting furiously. Then he left the room, slammed the door, locked it and left.

“Jupe?”

“Bob?”

“Oh, man, this has gone way wrong. Where are you?” Bob asked.

“Over here.”

“I can’t see a thing,” Bob said.

Suddenly Jupiter had a hand on his face. “Yes, that’s me. What happened?”

“Something strange. I followed King, but lost sight of him on the outskirts of Rocky Beach. Then I drove back—and suddenly I saw another King entering the house.”

“Well, that’s who caught me and brought me down here,” Jupiter said. “He took the mobile phone. We’re in a mess.”

“I thought I had to distract him somehow and get you out of the basement. So I went to the front door, banged on the door, pretended I was with the police.”

“I heard that.”

“I thought he’d be upstairs or in the basement, and I just wanted to run away real quick so he could chase me and you could disappear while he did it.”

“Good plan.”

“Yes,” mumbled Bob. “But it didn’t work. King was standing right behind the door. By the time I knew what was going on, he’d ripped it open and grabbed me. He had a gun. I couldn’t do anything. And now here I am. Holy cow!”

“You can say that again.”

“Where are we, anyway?” Bob asked.

“In the boiler room.”

“Boiler room? What about the mirror?”

“It’s probably in a safe hidden in the heating system. Here—” Jupiter guided Bob’s hands to the steel cabinet.

“Wow,” Bob said. “But then that means there’s no way we could have taken the mirror with us, right?”

“Probably not,” Jupiter said. “But we are now a few answers richer.”

“Really? What are they?”

“Haven’t you ever wondered which of the two Kings was which?”

“Yes, I did. But I didn’t quite understand. I guess the guy I was chasing was Jeremiah. The one who locked us in here was Jonathan. Anyway, he recognized me from upstairs and was pretty surprised to see me after the bank robbery. Am I right?”

“Yep.”

“What do you mean?” Bob wondered.

“I also bet that Jonathan got you and me. Whether the other one was Jeremiah, I highly doubt it.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Do you happen to have a light on you?”

“No flashlight, if that’s what you mean. But a lighter.” Bob dug it out of his pocket and set it off. For the first time, he could look around. The basement was smaller than he expected. He looked curiously at the hidden safe. Then he pruned. “What a strange lock.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Three keyholes?” Bob remarked. “The designer had to be a security freak.”

“You could say that,” Jupiter said. “But he also had a very special reason for it.”

The lighter got too hot. Bob turned it off. Then he thought about Jupiter’s words. And slowly it dawned on him. “You... you mean...”

“Remember the letter I found in Jonathan’s apartment? It said that they could only move the mirror together. And we wondered why Jeremiah wouldn’t just bring someone else here,” Jupiter said. “The safe is the answer—three keyholes for three different keys. And each of the brothers has one of them.”

“Each of the three brothers!”

16. Bomb Threat

“Triplets!” Bob exclaimed.

“Exactly,” Jupe said.

“I don’t believe it.”

“Yes, I do. And now the rest of it finally makes sense,” Jupiter explained. “We’ve always wondered who broke into Jonathan’s apartment. It shouldn’t be Jonathan because he would have had a key. But Jeremiah was just as unlikely, because if he had known Jonathan’s place of residence, he wouldn’t have had to hire us to look for him. Now we know the answer—it was the third one in the gang.”

“That’s crazy!”

“I suppose the King Brothers committed the break-in at Tricia Wilson’s together and decided to wait a year before selling the mirror for the matter to cool down. But they did not trust each other. Each was afraid that one of the others might snatch the mirror and disappear before the end of the year. So they put it in a safe that could only be opened with three keys. They each got one of them, and then they parted ways for a year. And then...”

“Shh!” Bob interrupted the First Investigator. “I think I heard something.”

They listened. Voices were coming from somewhere. Excited and angry voices. Unfortunately, they could not make out a single word.

“There’s something going on up there,” Jupiter noted. “And we can’t hear clearly. Damn!”

They pressed themselves against the door, but the voices were just too far away. Then Bob had an idea. “Wait a minute! Isn’t this a boiler room?”

“Yes.”

“The heating pipes probably run all over the house, don’t they?” Bob lit his lighter again.

Right next to the safe, a tube about the thickness of an arm led into the wall at head height. It was just right.

“You are brilliant!” cried Jupiter, who understood what Bob was getting at.

“Thank you.” He put his ear to the heating pipe.

Since the system was not working, Bob heard no gurgling water and no ticking of the meter, but sounds coming from all over the house. The pipes carried the sound down to the basement. Even the voices. It was very muffled and he couldn’t understand every word, but at least every other word. And that was enough to keep track of what was being said.

“I’m listening. It’s two men. The voices sound similar. Must be two of the three Kings.”

Jupiter pushed himself closer, but there was not enough room for both. “What are they saying?”

“I think Jonathan is surprised that his brother showed up. He didn’t expect it,” Bob said. “Now it’s about us. Jonathan yells a lot... He wants to know who we are and what this is all about. The other one tries to explain it to him... Detectives and stuff... Oh, wait a minute. Holy cow!”

“What?” Jupe exclaimed.

“He just said the third one is going down to the basement now.”

“The third?” Jupe wondered. “The third brother or—”

"Pete!" cried Bob excitedly. "That was Pete's voice! Oh, no! They got him too! I think they're coming down now."

"Why is he here? Why didn't he stay at Headquarters?"

"I don't know."

Again footsteps approached. Bob stepped back from the pipe. The King brothers should not know that he had overheard them.

The door was opened and Pete was pushed wordlessly into the room. Then the basement room became a prison again.

Bob briefly turned on the lighter. "Pete! How did you get here?"

"What a bummer," moaned Pete. "What a stupid crap. I wanted to save you! And now all three of us are stuck in this basement."

"Didn't I tell you to stay at Headquarters and wait for our return or my call?" Jupiter reprimanded him.

"Yeah, but you won't believe what happened!" Pete told them about his creepy visitor, whom he then confusingly had on the phone at the same time. Then his decision to go to Sunny Mountain. And how Jonathan King had finally caught him and brought him here by car. "And just think, now they're both up there! Jeremiah and Jonathan King! Can you explain that? I always thought Jeremiah didn't know where his brother was! What's this all about?"

"I can tell you that," Jupiter began and now in turn summarized the events of the last hours.

"Three?" cried Pete in surprise. "There are three?"

"Right. And that's why I don't think Jeremiah is really one of those up there," replied Jupiter. "I guess it is Jonathan and the third one whose name we don't know yet. He must have brought you here."

Pete nodded thoughtfully. "Could be. Anyway, he talked to me in a very funny way. Unlike Jeremiah."

"Shh, be quiet!" hissed Bob, who had put his ear back on the heating pipe. "They're talking again."

Bob listened. It was hard to hear anything out of the muffled buzz. "It's about the mirror... You can't get it out of the safe because you're missing the third key..."

"I don't understand," Pete said. "With enough time and the right tools, you can pick any lock. In case of emergency you just weld it open."

"Shh! I think they were just talking about a bomb."

"Bomb? What bomb?" Pete gasped.

"Something about a bomb that goes off if Jeremiah's key isn't here... They want Jeremiah to come here, too... But they don't know where he is... Damn!"

"What is it, Bob?" Jupe asked.

"I think they changed rooms or went outside. I can't hear them anymore." Disappointed, he left his listening post—and collided with Pete.

"Damn darkness! If only we had a flashlight! It's starting to make me nervous."

"Keep calm," said Jupiter. "I just wonder what all this talk is about a bomb going off. Was that figuratively speaking, Bob?"

"Didn't sound like it. It sounded like a real bomb," Bob said. "They were talking about the mirror and the safe and the bomb."

"Wait a minute!" Pete interrupted. "I think they're coming down."

"Again," muttered Jupiter. "It's like a dovecote here."

A few moments later, the two brothers stood in the cellar door in the glow of their flashlights and pointed their guns at The Three Investigators. It was the first time that Bob and Jupiter saw both at the same time. A strange sight.

“You were in contact with Jeremiah,” said one of them. It was impossible to tell who it was.

Jupiter nodded silently.

“Where is he?”

“We don’t know that,” Jupe replied.

“You’re lying.”

“No. He contacted us. We don’t know his address, only his phone number.”

“Give the number to me,” the man demanded.

“Why?”

“Otherwise you’re going to have a very bad time, fat boy,” the other one hissed and pointed the gun right at the head of the First Investigator.

“Easy, Jonathan.”

“Shut up, Jacob! Tell that fat boy to cough it up right now!”

“Never mind,” Jupiter said and gave Jeremiah’s phone number, which he had memorized three days ago. “So what happens to us now?”

“Wait and see,” was Jonathan’s surly reply. And they were gone again.

17. Jupiter Has an Idea

Half an hour went by without anything happening. Not a sound could be heard, neither through the door nor the heating pipe.

Then The Three Investigators heard heavy footsteps on the stairs.

“Quick, Pete, give me your lock picking case,” Jupiter hissed.

“What do you want with it now? Throw it at the King brothers?”

“Just give it to me, okay? You’ll see.”

“All right.”

A short time later, the padlock was removed from the latch and the King brothers stood before them. All three—Jeremiah, Jonathan and Jacob. What had been strange before now became bizarre—three of the same face. Jupiter thought he recognized Jeremiah by his not-so-hostile expression, but he was not sure.

“What are we going to do with these three lads?” he asked.

“We’ll deal with them later. Now let’s get that mirror and get out of here!” That was probably Jonathan.

“Not so fast,” Jupiter said and stood in front of the safe.

“Get out of there, fat boy!”

“I won’t do that. Not until you all answer a few questions,” Jupiter demanded.

“We’re not gonna do anything!” Jonathan stepped furiously one step closer to the First Investigator.

As quick as lightning, Jupiter pulled out a lock pick and put it into one of the three locks.

“Stop!” Jonathan froze in the middle of the movement. “What... what is this? Don’t touch the safe!”

“Are you afraid of the bomb, Mr King?” Jupiter asked calmly.

“Jupe!” cried Pete. “What... what are you talking about?”

“Very simple, Pete. This safe contains not only the Hernán Cortés mirror, but also a highly explosive device.”

“Excuse me?” Pete stammered.

“An explosive device that detonates if someone tries to pick one of the three locks without the correct key. And that will probably not only destroy the mirror, but the whole basement. Am I right?”

Now Jacob stepped forward. His voice was a hoarse whisper. “How did you know that?”

“I know more than you think. The thing with the bomb is nothing more than a logical conclusion,” claimed Jupiter, although it was not quite the truth. “The three of you were involved in stealing the mirror from Tricia Wilson’s house a year ago and hid it here. You each received a key. Only together could you retrieve the mirror from its hiding place. And to prevent either of you from betraying the other two by simply picking the remaining two locks, you placed a bomb in the safe that would detonate if anyone tampered with it improperly.”

For a few seconds, there was an incredulous silence. Bob and Pete had been able to work out a few things, but they had not thought of that. The surprise of the King brothers was even greater.

Jeremiah nodded slowly. "You have to turn all three keys at once. The bomb will go off if you try to use only one key."

Jonathan was running bright red. His head twitched around. "How did he even know about the mirror?"

"I didn't tell him," Jeremiah replied.

"You sent those three boys after me!" Jonathan objected.

"But only to keep you safe from the police!" Jeremiah insisted. "I didn't know where you were!"

"You wanted to find me to get my key and then leave me for the cops! You were gonna betray me!"

"Right," Jupiter intervened. "That's what Jeremiah actually intended. He heard about the bank robbery on TV, learned that the eyewitness was one of the famous Three Investigators and decided to let us look for you. If we had found you, it would probably have gone down exactly as you suspected. He would have taken the key from you and given you to the police. That would have given him two out of three keys for a million and a half dollars. And he would have found a way to get the third."

"That..." Jeremiah stammered, "that's..."

"... The truth. But by no means the whole truth. Because it gets better," Jupiter continued. "Jeremiah actually didn't tell us about the theft of the mirror. After all, he would have incriminated himself. No, that was Jacob's job."

The three brothers were so taken aback by Jupiter's statements that they listened to him in stunned silence.

"Jacob knew what was going on all along. He had seen through Jeremiah's plan, probably because he had been watching him and you, Jonathan, for the past year. But he was pursuing his own agenda. Of course, he wanted the mirror for himself as well. And he saw his chance when the police came looking for Jonathan. That was the chance to expose the theft of the mirror... and put you both behind bars. And how did he pull this off without revealing himself as a traitor? By tipping us off, which was in the form of a photo from a surveillance video taken at Miss Wilson's house at the time.

"We watched the whole video and finally came to the conclusion that two burglars must have been involved in the theft—Jonathan and Jeremiah. We didn't know anything about Jacob at that time, but he knew the video well enough to be sure that we wouldn't know of his existence through this evidence. If everything had gone according to his plan, we would have informed the police and two greedy brothers would have been in custody.

"Somehow, Jacob would have managed to steal the keys from you two, and so he would no longer have had to divide the stolen item by three, but could have kept it for himself. But when we visited this place last night, he realized that slowly but surely we had found out too much about the matter, including the mirror's hiding place. He wanted to get rid of us. So he showed up at our headquarters and spoke to Pete this afternoon.

"Jacob pretended to be Jeremiah and told him we should keep our hands off the case. What is clear is that he was trying to deceive you both from the beginning."

"Wow," Pete said. "I'm really impressed, Jupe."

"You filthy traitors!" yelled Jonathan. "The boy speaks the truth!"

"You're the one who got us all into trouble with your stupid bank robbery," Jeremiah defended himself.

"Because you both decided over my head to wait another six months! I was broke!" Jonathan argued.

“Stop!” cried Jacob, who had been silent until now. “Don’t you realize what this boy is trying to do? He wants to set us against each other! To gain time! And we are falling for his cheap tricks, too! We should take the mirror and leave now. We’ll figure it out when we’re safe.”

“You’d like that,” Jonathan sneered. “You just want to get your head out of the noose, you traitor!”

Jupiter cleared his throat. “I may be mistaken but with this criminal family, it would not surprise me if Jonathan had already made plans how he could kick his dear brothers out of the race, for example, plans for which he needed a large sum of money to implement. Say, about two hundred thousand dollars from a bank robbery.”

“Enough!” cried Jacob again. “We’ll take the mirror and leave. Get away from the safe, boy!”

“If you come one step closer, I will turn the lock pick.”

“Then we’ll all blow up!” Jeremiah cried.

“Right,” Jupiter said.

“You’re bluffing,” Jacob hissed.

“Whatever you say,” Jupe insisted.

“Okay,” Jacob King said grimly, and he took a step towards Jupiter.

18. All Good Things

The First Investigator's hand was shaking. He pushed himself closer to the safe.

Jacob took another step. Then his hand leapt forward, grabbed Jupiter's forearm and ripped it away. As quick as lightning, he pulled the lock pick out of the lock and held it triumphantly in front of Jupiter's nose. "I knew you were bluffing."

"Don't move!"

Everyone turned around. It was the police!

Suddenly, four policemen stood behind them in the basement corridor and pointed their guns at the three King brothers. In the heated debate, nobody had heard someone coming down to the basement.

As if on command, the three King brothers spun around and aimed their weapons into the corridor. It was the perfect coordination of a team that had worked together for decades. It was complete equality in body and mind.

The Three Investigators hurried to get out of the line of fire.

"Put your guns down," yelled one of the policemen. "Now!"

"You don't stand a chance," someone else said.

Bob recognized the voice. "Inspector Cotta!" he shouted.

"Exactly," the inspector replied from the corridor.

"There are five of my men outside," Cotta said. "So you can't win in a gunfight.

Surrender now."

Seconds passed without any of the Kings moving.

For a moment, Bob thought they were actually going to shoot. But then Jeremiah lowered the gun. He put it down on the floor and raised his hands. In a voice like the voice of the grave, he said: "It's all over."

Jacob followed, and finally Jonathan. A minute later, all three were handcuffed. Now Cotta entered the boiler room.

"Inspector Cotta!" cried Jupiter in relief. "How did you get here?"

"I can tell you that, Jupe," Pete replied proudly. "Because I've taken precautions."

"Precautions?" Jupe wondered.

"I knew we'd get into trouble," Pete explained. "Or, well, I suspected it. That's why I told the inspector's colleague to have Inspector Cotta call our Headquarters as soon as he gets to the office. Well, and then I changed the answering machine's greeting message to a message for the inspector."

"The Three Investigators are in deep trouble again," Cotta quoted. "We found the bank robber. And a stolen mirror. Just come quick, and I'll explain the rest." It was something like that followed by the address of this house."

"If I had been wrong, we would have been back at Headquarters in time and I could have deleted the message," Pete explained and grinned. "Good, huh?"

"Pete, that was a master-stroke," Jupiter said appreciatively.

"A master-stroke?" Cotta sneered. "To me it looks like the three of you have skated past disaster in a masterly fashion. Why do I have the bank robber I am looking for here in triplicate?"

“All good things come in threes,” Bob joked.

But Cotta was not in the mood for jokes. He frowned at them. “And why did you disobey my order to keep hands off this matter?”

“We’ll explain it outside,” Bob suggested. “I want to get out of this hole.”

“But first we should secure the mirror before another disaster happens,” said Jupiter.

“What mirror?” Cotta asked.

The First Investigator explained it to him. “The three of them would have the keys with them.”

“Sergeant!” cried Cotta in a sharp commanding tone. “Search the three gentlemen for three keys.”

The keys were found quickly—the King Brothers had worn them on a chain around their necks.

“I assume they match the three locks in the safe?” Cotta asked, but did not wait for an answer. “Sergeant, open the safe!”

The officer took one of the keys and put it in the first lock.

Jeremiah, Jonathan, Jacob, Jupiter, Pete and Bob shouted out together: “Stop!”

The sergeant winced and dropped the key.

“What’s wrong now?” cried Cotta.

Pete breathed again and said, “There’s a bomb in the safe that goes off when you turn the key.”

“A bomb?” Inspector Cotta sighed as he drove through his thinning hair. “Jupiter Jones, Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews. It’s always the same with you snoopers. I think you have a lot of explaining to do.”

That mirror looked ancient. It was blotchy and blunt and gave a pale and colourless picture of reality. But what the mirror surface lacked in shine, the frame made up for it a thousand times over. The artistically squiggled gold shone in the sunlight as if it were liquid. The gemstones embedded in it sparkled in all colours.

“Wow,” Pete breathed in awe and looked at the million-dollar work of art. “I’m blinded.”

“That’s what you always say when you stand in front of a mirror,” Bob smirked.

The Three Investigators, together with Inspector Cotta, visited Tricia Wilson two days later to personally return the mirror to her. Miss Wilson was overjoyed and had immediately promised The Three Investigators a big party as a reward. Then she had the adventurous story told to her in every detail.

Now they all stood together in front of the Hernán Cortés mirror, which was hanging in its old place again.

“There are still some things I haven’t quite grasped,” said Miss Wilson. “So the burglar in Jonathan King’s apartment was his brother Jacob.”

“Right,” Jupiter confirmed. “He was looking for the key and therefore destroyed the whole apartment. Of course, he couldn’t find it, because Jonathan always carried it with him.”

“And it was Jacob who was at the house on Sunny Mountain when you were there that night?”

“Yes,” Jupiter explained. “He had taken position there to guard the mirror from his rapacious brothers. What we hadn’t realized, however, was that he had actually woken up that night and had seen us from the window when we left. Since he had secretly followed his brother Jeremiah the days before and then sent us the photo from your video, he already knew

us. But he had underestimated us and with the photo he had even lured us on the right track. When he realized that we had already come so close to the truth, he paid Pete a visit the next day to dissuade us from our investigations."

"What about Jonathan?" Miss Wilson kept asking. "Where has he been all this time?"

"In a small motel nearby. Neither Jeremiah nor Jacob knew where he was hiding. It was pure coincidence that he showed up at the house on the mountain that day. He wanted to make sure that the mirror was okay. He caught me right in the act."

"And me," Bob added. "Shortly thereafter, he met, surprisingly enough, his brother Jacob, who had caught Pete. Then the two of them decided they had to act now and take the mirror. Jacob, however, had lost track of Jeremiah, since he was busy with us, but since Jupiter had Jeremiah's phone number, they could quickly contact him. Jeremiah understood the gravity of the situation and came straight to Sunny Mountain."

"Jacob, Jeremiah, Jonathan!" moaned Pete. "I was there, but I'm still not quite sure I get the story."

"I find it quite simple," Jupe said.

"Sure. I didn't expect otherwise." Inspector Cotta, who had previously stood by silently, cleared his throat. "Before you get too big for your self-adulation, I must intervene. You three have been on the edge of the law on this case more than once. I hope you realize that."

It was clear to them. After all, it wasn't the first time Cotta had given them that sermon. Apparently he thought it would be safer to repeat it in front of witnesses, so that The Three Investigators really took him seriously this time. "These methods of investigation are absolutely taboo for you in the future, do you understand me?"

"Yes, Inspector Cotta," Jupiter said obediently.

"Of course, I would prefer that you to stay away from detective work, but I don't think I'll live to see that. But in the future, you will let me know when you have discovered something! Not when it's almost too late. And certainly not on an answering machine."

Pete nodded. "I promise, Inspector."

"You know us very well," Jupiter quipped.

"Exactly," Cotta remarked. "Only too well."